

**The Limits and Potentials of Narrative Form:  
Recent Indian Fiction in English**

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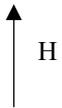


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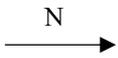
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## List of Abbreviations and Visual Forms

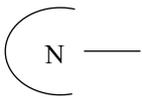
H	Hierarchy
N	Network
n	Small-scale network
R	Rhythm
W	Whole



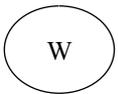
Existence of a narrative hierarchy



Horizontal expansion of a network



Element of a network (with connection line)



Complete whole



Incomplete or small-scale whole



Beginning or part of a whole



Continuation of a whole



Possible expansion of forms (in different directions)



Beginning of a new part or section of a novel



Connection between different forms (due to reappearance of characters)

## 1. Introduction

The recent boom of Indian writing in English has sparked the necessity to compare and categorise the works of a great number of authors that broach a wide range of topics and offer a large inventory of styles. Due to the postcolonial legacy and the fact that the development of Indian literature in English is closely linked to the country's history of colonialism and path to independence in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Indian novels are mainly categorised with regard to content and genre. This tendency to approach Indian novels predominantly according to content-related concerns continues to prevail in studies on twenty-first-century fiction. For instance, Emma Dawson Varughese's book-length study *Reading New India: Post-Millennial Indian Fiction in English*, published in 2013, first offers an overview of the most significant Indian writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and then discusses the most prominent topics addressed by Indian English fiction since the turn of the millennium. Even though she also considers formal features, her study is structured according to content-based concerns and genres. Bruce King's study *Rewriting India*, published in 2014, focuses on eight contemporary writers, among them Tabish Khair and Jeet Thayil. Even though some of the formal features of both Khair and Thayil's works might at first sight be more striking to the reader than the topics they address, King's study primarily provides a concise overview of the authors' biographies and careers, and a detailed but general reading of their works. Other significant studies of twenty-first-century fiction take similar approaches; the essay collection *The Indian English Novel of the New Millennium*, edited by Prabhat K. Singh and published in 2013, focuses on recent developments of the Indian English novel, primarily offering readings of individual texts that focus on a variety of topics, such as globalisation, identity formation and Dalit experiences. *South-Asian Fiction in English: Contemporary Transformations*, edited by Alex Tickell and published in 2016, also examines recent trends in contemporary Indian fiction, ranging from contributions on the portrayal of urban spaces and regional insurgencies to essays on graphic novels and short stories.

While all of these studies on recent Indian fiction in English focus mainly on the works' content, there is at least one major series of articles, published in *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* in 2016, that focuses on literary experimentalism and includes readings of fiction from former colonies. More precisely, the volume "focuses on a radical strand of experimental world literature, one that participates critically and creatively in the ongoing struggle for affirmative social transformation in a globalizing world" (1), as Wendy Knepper and Sharae Deckard note in the introductory article "Towards a Radical World Literature: Experimental Writing in a Globalizing World." The articles do therefore not focus

exclusively on India but consider recent experimental literature from around the globe, including David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* and fiction from various former colonies that seems to display a stronger global perspective than most of the texts that will be analysed in this study.

As Indian literature is primarily approached through the lens of Postcolonial Studies, it is understandable why the studies on recent Indian fiction cited above place primary emphasis on content and genre. It should be noted that although genre is also form-related, the studies do not primarily focus on how the formal features that might be unique to a particular genre shape the content. Even though the reasons for the current kind of approach to Indian fiction in English are obvious and justified, the great variety in terms of narrative form that recent novels display makes a new angle with primary emphasis on formal features worth striving for. Elisabetta Marino expresses a similar view at the beginning of her essay on Tabish Khair's *The Bus Stopped*, which will also be analysed in this study:

The postcolonial literary label has certainly contributed to the acknowledgement of many accomplished writers from South Africa, India or Nigeria, who might have remained unknown to a wider readership, had universities, colleges and freelance researchers not devoted so many efforts to the development of this field of study and its theory. Nonetheless, the downside of every label is the unavoidable restriction it imposes: despite its unquestionable relevance, a thorough focus on the postcolonial experience may actually lead scholars to overlook some of the other equally meaningful features of many multifaceted works of art, thus suggesting a partial, incomplete, at times oversimplified reading of the books by authors from formerly colonized countries. (66)

Even though twenty-first-century Indian novels may not necessarily be labelled as postcolonial anymore, they are still approached through the lens of Postcolonial Studies with a focus on content-related issues, which might induce critics to overlook the novels' striking formal features. As Stephen Arata points out in his essay "Some Versions of Form," "[t]he materials a novelist works with remain 'inert' until they are brought to life by being formed, and the same materials can be formed in many ways" (207). Arata further draws attention to the fact that "the perception of form does not arise from the application of objective criteria but instead depends on the recognition of shared narrative conventions and norms, which can differ across cultures and historical periods" (202). Even though it is impossible to separate form and content completely, a primary focus on the former will help to explain why a text is perceived in a certain way by a certain audience. Additionally, as there are innumerable ways the content of a novel could be shaped, it is important to acknowledge that the formal features of a work of fiction are not only of secondary importance. In fact, one could even argue that the narrative form brings forth the content in the first place, and that specific formal arrangements may

trigger unexpected reactions in the reader and point to the constructedness of reality, which may not be afforded sufficiently by the narrative's content.

The West has a long history of experimental writing. With the onset of modernism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, experiments with narrative form became increasingly prominent, particularly in contrast to the realist mode in novels of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Experiments with narrative form continued during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the postmodernist period, and a large number of studies has been published in order to define and examine the most important features of the literature produced during these periods. However, this observation does not intend to imply that experiments with narrative form are restricted to specific historical periods, as is already indicated by the example of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, published in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Further, it is not the aim of this study to classify the Indian novels chosen for this analysis as postmodernist or to see them as part of specific literary movements. Rather, the present study aims to develop a new approach to narrative form that explains its relationship to the narrative's content. A look at the Western tradition of experimental writing and its most dominant features may nevertheless be helpful for the analysis of Indian literature as well since the discussion of the seemingly opposing terms 'realist' and 'experimental' has emerged from Western contexts. Additionally, the novel as a genre only emerged in India during the colonial period and its development has always been influenced by trends of the Western literary tradition. For instance, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) can be considered both a postmodernist and a postcolonial text, indicating that it is difficult to separate Indian English fiction from the Western tradition. In her essay "The 'Post' in Postcolonial," Sara Upstone explains this observation in more detail; she notes that even though critics have been "keen to point out the differences between postmodern and postcolonial approaches" (262), her paper will argue that "[...] they overlooked the impossibility of separating such practices where the very existence of empire has made the colonized Other an irrepressible presence in Western philosophy" (262). In terms of *Midnight's Children*, Upstone points out that the novel could be read as both postmodernist and postcolonial but that the two readings would have different foci (cf. 264). Nevertheless, most novels of the large corpus of postcolonial literature from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, which has arguably had the greatest impact on the Indian publishing scene till this day, had the primary intention to engage with India's relationship to the former colonisers and the country's history since independence. Postmillennial fiction, on the other hand, has started to engage with new topics and present-day issues in India, becoming more emancipated and developing new literary strategies.

Arundhati Roy's Booker prize-winning *The God of Small Things*, dating back to 1997, which has been celebrated as another important success of Indian writing in English, has opened up the book market to other writers due to Western recipients' growing interest in India itself. Many more young writers have made their debuts since Roy's breakthrough and her portrayal in the West as an 'exotic' bestselling author and global activist. Her novel, celebrated for both its innovative narrative technique and courageous portrayal of Indian taboo topics, has presumably inspired and encouraged other authors to make their voices heard as well. Raj Kamal Jha's *The Blue Bedspread*, published only two years later, addresses similar topics, namely incest and domestic violence, and is also characterised by narrative fragmentation. Jha's following novels are also inventive in terms of plot structure, narrative form and multimodal features, using a wide range of techniques that may strike readers as unconventional. The same can be observed in the formally inventive works of several other contemporary Indian authors. Most of these writers have started to establish themselves in the Indian literary scene, even though their success is not (yet) comparable to that of Roy or Rushdie. Focusing on novels by Tabish Khair, Neel Mukherjee, Altaf Tyrewala, Jeet Thayil, Anuradha Roy, Shubhangi Swarup, Raj Kamal Jha, Arundhati Roy and Meena Kandasamy, this study will examine the tendency towards literary experimentalism in recent Indian fiction and discuss the relationship of the novels' unconventional formal features to the wide range of topics they address. Instead of a primarily content-oriented approach, this study will offer an analysis that places emphasis on the novels' form and examines the function of their narrative strategies for the mediation of their content, a rather unconventional but fruitful approach to Indian literature.

Knepper and Deckard argue in the introduction to their volume that there might be a new trend of experimental writing, noting that "[i]f the twentieth century saw the waning of certain modes of experimentation, we also find ample evidence of the reawakening of experimental literatures in the contemporary period, especially in writing that seeks to renew and extend the call for social justice globally" (2). However, neither the literature analysed in their volume nor the Indian novels chosen for this study in particular seem to be comparable to the writings of radical avant-garde movements. As Knepper and Deckard further state in the introduction to the volume, "[t]his special issue investigates how contemporary experimental world literature mediates the scales, locations, and practices of globalization's world-making activities through its radical interventions" (1). Nevertheless, most of the texts analysed in this volume do not seem to be radically experimental in terms of form even though they may display a stronger multimodal dimension than the formally inventive examples of recent Indian literature chosen for this study. Additionally, the texts chosen for this study mostly focus on

regional insurgencies and specifically Indian issues, employing techniques that may strike readers as unconventional but not necessarily revolutionary. The reason for this impression is that the novels also have a realist dimension, which indicates that it is problematic to describe the relationship between these two concepts as a binary opposition. Instead, the novels seem to fall into an in-between category, combining realist and experimental strategies. As Amardeep Singh points out in his essay on the development of the Indian novel in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is, among other trends, a “new urban realism in Indian fiction” that “features a highly realistic style that gives precedence to local details and often an emphasis on regional cities like Patna or Hyderabad, rather than national metropolitan centers (i.e., Delhi and Mumbai)” (6). Similar tendencies can also be discerned in several of the novels chosen for this study despite their experimental features.

In fact, in the Indian context, the combination of realist and experimental elements should be understood as a way of reflecting upon the construction of multiple Indian realities, and hence potentially also as a useful tool for social criticism. This is particularly the case since contemporary Indian society is highly diverse and characterised by a variety of social, religious, ethnic and political tensions, an examination of which requires new narrative strategies. Hence, the novels’ formal arrangements reflect upon the construction of multiple realities, upon the psychological impact these realities have on the individual, and upon the attempts to deal with and overcome these issues, at least in the realm of fiction.

In order to approach this, the present study first aims to explore what limits and potentials specific narrative forms may have and how these forms may interact with each other to constitute, and reflect upon, multiple (Indian) realities. Each form has its specific affordances, as Caroline Levine points out in her study *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. Therefore, the text passages that are of particular interest for this analysis are those that display a structural break of some sort, or, in other words, a clash of various forms. Hence, the aim will be to analyse how the various forms of non-linear and fragmented narratives are arranged and connected to each other, and how they interact with the narratives’ content. Additionally, such a pluralisation of forms, which may initially trigger surprise or confusion, usually forces the reader to become an active participant of the narrative. This is mainly due to a persistent tension between the novels’ fragmented forms and the reader’s expectation to be offered a linear narrative that finally achieves closure. As Esterino Adami also notes in this context, “[w]hen an author decides to break the traditional sequencing of a story, this operation affects the entire negotiation between text and reader, as it provokingly challenges natural expectations and consequential interpretations” (3). Hence, the powerful impact of such novels

arises from persistent tensions between form(s), content and recipients' expectations of what a novel should be like.

The study will be divided into two parts: a theoretical framework and a close reading analysis of the individual novels. The first subchapter of the theoretical framework will provide a brief overview of possible definitions of experimental writing up to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and then examine the opposition between realist and experimental literature based on Werner Wolf's study *Ästhetische Illusion und Illusionsdurchbrechung in der Erzählkunst*, which explores the formation of aesthetic illusion and its limitations in narratives. The second subchapter of the theoretical part will examine what effects an enhanced focus on experientiality, as defined in Monika Fludernik's study *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology*, might have on the understanding of this opposition between realism and experimentalism. This discussion will point to the problems of such a binary view and make it clear that the confusion a text may trigger in the reader cannot be explained sufficiently by solely identifying its deviations from realist fiction. The next step will be to consider Marco Caracciolo's redefinition of Fludernik's concept of experientiality for a cognitive approach in *The Experientiality of Narrative*, which postulates that experientiality is not intrinsic to a literary text but arises from the reader's interaction with it. The examination of Caracciolo's study will further indicate that both form and content significantly influence the reactions that are triggered in the reader. The third subchapter of the theoretical part will then offer a systematic approach to form based on Caroline Levine's study *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, which intends to develop an extended concept of form that considers various patterns of sociopolitical experiences and offers a new understanding of how form relates to content and to other forms. Levine's approach is also useful in the context of narrative form in particular as it helps to interpret the impact of structural breaks in a novel that may trigger confusion or other unexpected reactions in the reader. The fourth subchapter of the theoretical part therefore aims to outline how exactly the concepts Levine develops in a sociopolitical context may be redefined for the purpose of literary analysis, particularly with regard to recent Indian fiction in English.

The second part of the study will be devoted to an exploration of these redefined concepts' potential for engaging with various recent Indian English novels, offering close readings of the chosen texts and exploring to what extent the unconventional formal strategies can be understood as a way of constructing, and reflecting upon, multiple (Indian) realities. This second part first moves from an analysis of novels whose formal arrangements reflect upon the complex social structures and hierarchies of Indian society to an exploration of novels whose formal arrangements depict how the life stories of specific individuals who are part of

this social set-up are constructed, and then to an analysis of novels that reflect upon the psychological impact of various outer forces and real-life incidents on the individual. The analysis of the novels offered in the last chapter in particular will demonstrate that there often are attempts to create a sense of wholeness despite these various layers of fragmentation.

More precisely, the first chapter of this second part, chapter 3, will offer a comparison of Tabish Khair's *The Bus Stopped* (2004), Neel Mukherjee's *A State of Freedom* (2017) and Altaf Tyrewala's *No God in Sight* (2005), all of which are concerned with the various types of divisions running through Indian society. These novels' formal arrangements hence constitute multiple (Indian) realities, characterised by social, ethnic and religious diversity, which more conventional storytelling techniques would not afford to the same extent. Chapter 4 will discuss Jeet Thayil's *The Book of Chocolate Saints* (2017), Anuradha Roy's *Sleeping on Jupiter* (2015) and Shubhangi Swarup's *Latitudes of Longing* (2018), whose formal arrangements reflect upon how individual life stories are constructed and connected to each other. The novels analysed in this chapter therefore move away from a general and critical overview of Indian society's diversity and instead focus on the construction of the life stories of a few specific individuals, exploring their relationships to other characters and their position in the larger context of social and political forces. Focusing on Raj Kamal Jha's novels *The Blue Bedspread* (1999) and *Fireproof* (2006), and on Tabish Khair's *Night of Happiness* (2018), chapter 5 is devoted to an analysis of first-person narrators whose stories weave a web of truth and imagination and therefore offer a greater insight into the characters' minds. Hence, the formal arrangements of the novels analysed in this chapter reflect upon the psychological impact of various external forces on the individual. The last chapter will offer a discussion of Raj Kamal Jha's latest novel, *The City and the Sea* (2019), Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) and Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014), all of which manage to create a sense of closure and wholeness despite various layers of narrative fragmentation. The novels chosen for this last chapter explore the effects of real-life incidents and massacres, and the psychological impact these incidents have on specific individuals and communities. Hence, the analysis offered in this chapter will demonstrate that the novels' formal arrangements reflect upon the multiple tensions and divisions that run through Indian society, and, at the same time, upon the attempts to overcome the sense of inner and outer fragmentation that results from these divisions.



## 2. Coming to Terms: Aesthetic Illusion, Experience and the Affordances of Narrative Form(s)

### 2.1 Realist vs. Experimental Literature

This chapter will offer a brief overview of how scholars try to define experimental in contrast to realist literature, before focusing in particular on Werner Wolf's study *Ästhetische Illusion und Illusionsdurchbrechung in der Erzählkunst*, which provides a detailed analysis of the principles that are involved in the formation of literary illusion. Using Chetan Bhagat's *The Three Mistakes of My Life* and Raj Kamal Jha's *Fireproof* as examples, the aim of this chapter is to demonstrate that there are texts that clearly follow Wolf's principles, whereas others cannot easily be classified as either realist or experimental.

Referring to the Western tradition of experimental writing, Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons and Brian McHale note in the introduction to the *Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* that "[e]xperimental literature, as the contents of this *Routledge Companion* amply testify, is irreducibly diverse" (1). Bray, Gibbons and McHale further explain that in their study "the modifier *experimental* is used more or less interchangeably with *avant-garde*, and sometimes *innovative*" (1, emphasis in the original), adding that "aesthetic avant-gardism continues to be allied with political radicalism in a number of twentieth- and twenty-first-century artistic and literary movements" (1-2). The essays of the volume examine a wide range of literary phenomena that could be termed 'experimental,' starting with an analysis of historical avant-garde literature before moving on to a non-chronological exploration of various literary experiments across genres, and the influence of digital innovations on recent literature in the last section (cf. Bray, Gibbons, McHale 3-4). The variety of essays included in this companion indicates that it is not possible to provide a universal definition of what experimental literature is. Many scholars take a similar view; Birgit Moosmüller, for instance, points out in her study on contemporary English short stories that it is problematic to define the term 'experimental' as its meaning varies from context to context (cf. 13), and Warren Motte also notes in a recent essay that "[t]he notion of 'experimental writing' is difficult to define with any kind of precision. Most of the time it is invoked in a largely offhanded manner, as if its meaning were immediately clear to everyone, obviating the need for further discussion" (1). Motte adds that "[t]hat assumption is a matter of expediency rather than anything else, for even a cursory glance at the way people use the term quickly reveals that the way we understand it varies extravagantly" (1). Julia Jordan and Laurent Milesi further point out the problem that

“[e]xperimental as a term is unavoidably evaluative: either as a synonym for unsuccessful, unreadable, or elitist; or with its positive but equally problematic associations of progressiveness and intellectual ambition” (6).

On a basic level, Annegret Maack argues in her study *Der experimentelle englische Roman der Gegenwart* that scholars mainly tend to define experimental literature by contrasting its striking or unconventional features with those of nineteenth-century realist novels (cf. 3). She adds that, in fact, only by contrasting experimental techniques with realist ones it is possible to define the former (cf. Maack 6). Maack later names some of the most important features of experimental writing, for instance the disappearance of a central narrative perspective the reader could rely on (cf. 41), and adds that a realist novel, generally speaking, intends to offer a mimetic depiction of reality and society, whereas experimental authors tend to abandon a clear reference to the world and produce texts that are increasingly self-reflexive (cf. 42). Bruno Zerweck also tries to define the features of experimental literature in contrast to literary realism. In his comprehensive study *Die Synthese aus Realismus und Experiment: Der englische Roman der 1980er und 1990er Jahre aus erzähltheoretischer und kulturwissenschaftlicher Sicht*, Zerweck first makes out three phases in the development of the English novel of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the phase from around 1945 to 1960, he discerns an abandonment of experimental modernism and a turn towards realism. In the second phase from 1960 to 1980, he notices an increase in formal experiments, and, in the third phase from 1980 until today, he makes out a synthesis of realism and experiment (cf. Zerweck 1-2). Zerweck also points out the difficulty of defining the terms ‘realism’ and ‘literary experiment,’ acknowledging the fact that there is by now a large number of meanings associated with the two concepts. He adds that the terms mean different things in different contexts: for instance, the term ‘realism’ is sometimes used to refer to the literary movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and in other cases as a synonym for narrative techniques that refer to the world, in contrast to self-referential, experimental techniques (cf. Zerweck 19-20). Despite these difficulties, Zerweck intends to develop a definition that describes the relationship between the two seemingly oppositional terms. He argues that realism and experiment do not form a binary opposition but are instead the two ends of a broad spectrum of narrative techniques (cf. Zerweck 35). The fact that the idea of a clear opposition between experimental and realist literature is highly problematic is also indicated in Amy J. Elias’s essay “Meta-Mimesis? The Problem of British Postmodern Realism.” She argues that in many literary texts, for instance in Graham Swift’s *Waterland*, there is a blurring of “boundaries between postmodern ‘experiment’ and ‘Realism’” (Elias 9). The essay therefore pursues the question of whether it is possible to “define in these novels a British ‘postmodern

Realism' that is not a contradiction in terms" (Elias 9). Elias points out that, in terms of mid-Victorian fiction, "[m]ost critics identify at least some of the following four characteristics [...]: choice of typical subjects in a mimetic mode; authorial objectivity; the doctrine of natural causality contributing to character motivation; and a particular attitude toward the world that is seen as true" (10). After a closer examination of these realist features, Elias notes in terms of Martin Amis's novels that even though they "are postmodernist in style, tone, and focus [...], they often seem to be closely allied with a mimetic aim [...]" (22). Elias's observations indicate that a clear distinction between experimental and realist literature is problematic as there are novels that display features of both categories. Her closing statement is that "positing a 'Postmodern Realism' may allow critics to account for the odd mixture of experiment and verisimilitude, metafiction and realism in this fiction" (Elias 28).

Werner Wolf provides a detailed and systematic examination of realist and experimental techniques in his book-length study *Ästhetische Illusion und Illusionsdurchbrechung in der Erzählkunst: Theorie und Geschichte mit Schwerpunkt auf englischem illusionsstörenden Erzählen*. In the second chapter, Wolf argues that the impression of aesthetic illusion is dependent on three factors: the text, the reader, and the historico-cultural context in which the work of art is situated (cf. 115). He starts with an analysis of the context-based factors, arguing that whether a literary text can be considered realist or not is always dependent on the specific cultural and historical circumstances (cf. Wolf 117) as what is likely to happen can easily change over time (cf. Wolf 118). As a second step, Wolf examines to what extent the reader is involved in the formation of an illusionistic image (cf. 124), which is problematic as each reader has their individual abilities. According to Wolf, factors that differ from reader to reader are, among others, imagination, the ability to decode textual signals, and individual attitudes and views (cf. 124). These external factors, concerning context and reader, are difficult to grasp and to define but cannot be neglected in the formation of literary illusion (cf. Wolf 129). In general, the formation of literary illusion is a highly complex process, and the violation of certain factors may have serious or less serious effects (cf. Wolf 131). After outlining the external factors, Wolf moves on to the internal, or textual, one; he makes out six textual principles that are essential for the formation of aesthetic illusion: vivid worldliness, 'Sinnzentriertheit,' perspectivity, adequacy of the medium, interestingness, and celare-arterem (cf. 133-34). Vivid worldliness means that the text has to simulate a realistic image of the outside world. It stresses the fact that the text has to refer to spatial objects that could exist in the outside world and create a temporal dimension (cf. Wolf 134-35). In order to achieve this, one important technique is to offer detailed descriptions of the environment and the characters of the textual world (cf. Wolf

137). Wolf adds that the text should offer both an insight into the characters' minds and a description of their outer appearances and personal situations (cf. 139). In short, the first principle requires the creation of a spatiotemporal world that is fitted out with details referring to concrete objects (cf. Wolf 140). 'Sinnzentriertheit,' the second principle, says that the fictional world of the literary text should imitate the structures of the world the reader lives in. Thus, the concrete and vivid textual world created according to the first principle has to follow rules and processes that correspond to the reader's own physical world (cf. Wolf 141). It is therefore important to pay attention not only to the details of the fictional world but also to its nature and presentation (cf. Wolf 141). The aim is to avoid ambiguities or contradictions, which may endanger the formation of literary illusion (cf. Wolf 143). This is important as readers know that the literary text is not eternal, and therefore expect it to offer all the relevant information and avoid unnecessary distractions (cf. Wolf 146). Perspectivity, the third principle, dictates that the text should offer one central perspective and that it should present things the way the characters could potentially see, know, or experience them (cf. Wolf 153). The fourth principle of the adequacy of the medium prescribes which techniques are appropriate for a specific kind of medium. In this context, Wolf first examines to what extent the technique of description can be considered suitable for narrative texts. He argues that description is a necessary but dangerous instrument for the formation of literary illusion. He explains that description is necessary for the simulation of vivid worldliness but at the same time problematic as processes or circumstances that are spatially simultaneous are presented consecutively (cf. Wolf 166). According to Wolf, it is therefore important that narration remains more dominant than description in narrative texts (cf. 166). Another way to support the formation of aesthetic illusion is to insert dialogues into the text (cf. Wolf 169) as this is the most natural form of communication that people encounter on a daily basis and provides a direct insight into others' thoughts and opinions. Interestingness, the fifth principle, refers to the arousal of the reader's interest, the aim being to draw the reader into the illusionistic world of the text. In Wolf's view, a narrative is most likely to arouse the reader's interest when the plot is at its centre, in contrast to a primary focus on character development or setting (cf. 177-78). In addition, too many scene changes or plotlines, particularly when they are not linear, may be counterproductive for the formation of aesthetic illusion as the reader might not have enough time to switch to the next setting and to imagine the new situation (cf. Wolf 179). The text should also build up suspense, confront readers with unexpected events and appeal to their emotions in order to fulfil the principle of interestingness (cf. Wolf 187-88). The last principle, the *celare-arterem* principle, aims to conceal the text's fictionality (cf. Wolf 133-34). This entails the avoidance of addressing

the nature of the medium explicitly in the form of metafictional comments (cf. Wolf 191). Additionally, texts should also avoid overt authorial narrators, whose presence might be problematic for the formation of literary illusion (cf. Wolf 192). Wolf notes that these six principles are flexible and should not be considered as strict rules. Hence, Wolf concedes that it is problematic to argue that these principles definitely lead to the formation of literary illusion. Rather, they should be considered as flexible principles that may promote such an illusion to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the specific context (cf. Wolf 200). He also emphasises the fact that it is important to achieve the right balance of the principles (cf. Wolf 201).

The following paragraphs will examine to what extent Chetan Bhagat's *The Three Mistakes of My Life* and Raj Kamal Jha's *Fireproof*, two recent Indian novels about the Gujarat riots of 2002, fulfil the principles Wolf has identified. Bhagat's novel portrays the lives of Govind, an aspiring young businessman, and his two friends, Ish and Omi. Together, they open a shop for cricket equipment in Ahmedabad and particularly Govind is keen to extend the business further, which is why he additionally starts tutoring school children and Ish offers cricket lessons. When they have generated enough income, Govind buys a second store in a shopping mall, which he later calls the first mistake of his life since the store gets destroyed by an earthquake before it could even be opened. The second mistake of his life happens when he starts a secret relationship with Vidya, who is Ish's younger sister and one of his math students. The book is set in 2002, the year of the Gujarat riots, and takes these events as its climax. Omi's cousin gets killed in the Godhra train burning by Muslim radicals, presumably the trigger for the subsequent violence in Gujarat. Mama, the father of Omi's cousin, is devastated by the news and eager to avenge his son's death. He organises a mob to take revenge on the Muslim population in his district, killing the parents of Ali, a young Muslim boy who attends Ish's cricket lessons and has great potential to make it to the national team one day. Infuriated and drunk, Mama and his mob intend to kill Ali as well, who is hiding with Govind, Ish and Omi in an old bank. During the violent confrontation, Omi tragically gets killed by Mama, his own uncle, who later dies himself. Govind and Ish manage to save Ali's life, but his wrist gets severely injured when Govind takes one second too long to pull him away from the attackers, which turns out to be the third mistake of his life as Ali is later unable to pursue his cricket career. In the following passage from the first chapter of the novel, Govind walks back home after watching a cricket match with Ish and Omi:

I walked back home. The narrow lanes of the old city were bustling with the evening crowd. My house and Ishaan's were only half a kilometer apart. Everything in my world fell between this distance. I passed by the Nana Park, extra packed with kids playing cricket as India had won the match. I played here almost every day of my school life.

[...] Nana Park is where I had first met Ishaan and Omi, over fifteen years ago. [...] Like most neighbourhood kids, we went to the Belrampur Municipal School, hundred metres down Nana Park. Of course, only I studied while Ish and Omi ran to the park at every opportunity. Three bicycles tried to overtake each other in the narrow by lane. I had to step inside Qazi restaurant to let them pass. A scent of fried coriander and garlic filled the narrow room. The cook prepared dinner, a bigger feast than usual as India had won the match. (*The Three Mistakes of My Life* 6-7)

Govind, the first-person narrator of the novel, offers a detailed description of the setting, mentioning specific locations and even noting the smell that is coming from the restaurant he steps into. He adds some information on his childhood and shortly afterwards also expresses his love for Ahmedabad: “It is strange, but if you have had happy times in a city for a long time, you consider it the best city in the world” (*The Three Mistakes of My Life* 7). These passages already indicate that the novel tries to simulate a realistic image of the outside world by describing the environment of the fictional world and by offering an insight into the characters and their backgrounds, thus following Wolf’s principle of vivid worldliness. It also becomes clear that the textual world resembles the world the reader may live in, thus fulfilling Wolf’s second principle of ‘Sinnzentriertheit’ as well. Additionally, the entire novel is written in the first person, realistically presenting Govind’s perspective and attitudes, which fulfils Wolf’s principle of perspectivity. Further, the novel offers many dialogues, a suitable element for realist novels, as Wolf has pointed out:

‘That is your tenth chapatti,’ Ish told Omi.

‘Ninth. Who cares? It is a buffet. Can you pass the ghee please?’

‘All that food. It has to be bad for you,’ Ish said.

‘Two hundred push-ups.’ Omi said. ‘Ten rounds of Nana Park. One hour at Bittoo Mama’s home gym. You do this everyday [sic] like me and you can hog without worry.’

People like Omi are no-profit customers. There is no way Gopi could make money off him.

‘Aamras and ras malai. Thanks,’ Omi said to the waiter. Ish and I nodded for the same.

‘So, what’s up? I’m listening,’ Ish said as he scooped up the last spoon of aamras.

‘Eat your food first. We’ll talk over tea,’ I said. People argued less on a full stomach.

(*The Three Mistakes of My Life* 13-14)

Even though the novel contains many dialogues, presenting the characters’ daily conversations and interactions, as in the passage above, the text also builds up suspense and confronts the reader with unexpected events, particularly towards the end of the novel, which would be in line with Wolf’s principle of interestingness. This is already indicated by the title of the novel, which makes the reader curious to find out what Govind’s three mistakes are. After the earthquake that destroys Govind’s shop (cf. *The Three Mistakes of My Life* 104-109) and his revelation that it was a mistake to buy it in the first place, the reader is made to wait for the

second mistake. At this point, the love story with Vidya starts developing and it gradually becomes clear that Govind has a crush on her (cf. *The Three Mistakes of My Life* 166). As Suparna Chakravarty points out in this context, “[t]he novel is apparently not a love story but then the love interest is very much an integral part of the story” (101). After the first sexual encounter with Vidya, Govind reveals that this was the second mistake of his life (cf. *The Three Mistakes of My Life* 200), making it clear to the reader that it will get him into trouble. During the violent confrontation with the mob organised by Mama, Govind hands his phone over to Ish so he can call the police, but exactly at that moment he receives a text message from Vidya that reveals their secret relationship to Ish (cf. *The Three Mistakes of My Life* 237), who subsequently stops talking to Govind altogether. This unexpected event is soon followed by Govind’s third mistake as he fails to protect Ali from the attackers and his wrist gets severely injured (cf. *The Three Mistakes of My Life* 246). As Chakravarty notes with reference to Bhagat’s novels, “[w]hile analyzing the structural aspect of the novels, it may be said that the pace of storytelling is so fast that the events automatically create an easy to follow structural pattern which is suitable for the author’s purpose (since the target audience is the fast moving young India)” (101). Hence, even though the novel is not packed with overly exciting events, it has the potential to draw readers into the world of the characters, keeping them interested and confronting them with some unexpected incidents. Further, the fictionality of the textual world the reader is drawn into remains concealed as there are no metafictional comments and Govind does not address the reader directly, thus also fulfilling Wolf’s *celare-arterem* principle. However, it should be noted that the novel’s prologue and epilogue are also slightly unconventional as they blur the lines between fact and fiction. In the prologue, Chetan Bhagat receives an email from Govind, who is about to commit suicide due to his three mistakes. Govind survives the suicide attempt and Bhagat subsequently visits him in hospital, where Govind tells him the whole story, which then forms the main part of the novel (cf. *The Three Mistakes of My Life* ix-xx). In the epilogue, Bhagat also invites Ish and Vidya to the hospital, who forgive Govind and tell him that Ali has recovered (cf. *The Three Mistakes of My Life* 250-58). Even though the prologue and the epilogue therefore blur the lines between fact and fiction, Govind’s main narrative mostly follows Wolf’s principles.

In contrast to *The Three Mistakes of My Life*, Raj Kamal Jha’s *Fireproof* does not follow Wolf’s principles to the same extent. The opening statement of the novel already indicates that the story to follow is by no means a conventional one in terms of structure or content:

**We, the undersigned, do solemnly affirm in this, our opening statement to you, the reader, the following:**

- 1 That we regret to inform you we shall not tell you our names.
  - 2 That if you insist on at least one piece of identification, you may call us by the roles we play, mentioned at the end of this statement.**
  - 3 That alternatively, you may refer to us, at any time, by one or more of any of the following: bird beast, black blue, Hindu Muslim, Muslim Hindu, fire ice, cock cunt, song dance, sickness health, bridge river, radio TV, cat dog, night day. So on and so on.
  - 4 That we could keep providing you with more such options. Endlessly and tirelessly. Until the hours go by, until night uncoils into day. Weeks slide, months fold, seasons shift. Until the city swells, the streets crumble, the earth moves.**
  - 5 That one reason we can do this is because we have all the time in the world.
  - 6 That this is because we are all dead.**
- [...] (*Fireproof* 3-4, emphasis in the original)

The opening statement, which resembles a play mode, is rendered by dead characters and visually presented in the form of a list, with every other statement printed in bold. The fact that the speakers are dead and hence not located in any recognisable environment already contradicts Wolf's principles of worldliness and 'Sinnzentriertheit.' However, the reader, who is addressed in the opening statement several times, which additionally poses a problem to Wolf's *celare-arterem* principle, is afterwards presented with the beginning of a story that does not appear to be completely surreal or far-fetched. Mr Jay, the novel's protagonist and homodiegetic narrator, is waiting for his wife to give birth to their first child in a hospital in Ahmedabad during the Gujarat riots. The baby is severely deformed, but Jay feels deep affection for his son and later sets out on a dangerous journey through the city to get to the train station and meet up with a mysterious woman, Miss Glass, who has promised him to set his son right. When Jay is waiting to see his baby for the first time and urgently wants to talk to the head nurse, he describes the situation as follows:

Her blue plastic name tag read HEAD N RSE, the U rubbed away leaving just a little white dot. Although I had been waiting in the Maternity Ward's lobby the entire evening and I knew my wife was the only one scheduled to deliver that night – her name written in chalk on the blackboard outside, her patient number 110742 – although I knew the next baby brought out of the Operating Theatre would be mine, I didn't see Head Nurse when she emerged with the bundle. I lost her in the shuffle of the crowd, in the cautious hurry of patients, their relatives and the hospital staff, in the scramble of those running to take the lift or walking up and down the stairs that led to the main entrance below. I lost her in the shapes of those on the floor, lying down, curled up, those still waiting for beds with their names and their numbers. (*Fireproof* 18)

It is certainly possible for readers to imagine this chaotic hospital scene that Jay describes in a realist manner. He provides details on the environment and reports a well-known scenario that readers may have experienced in their own physical world, thus contributing to the formation

of literary illusion in Wolf's sense. Additionally, the story has the potential to make readers identify with the protagonist, the caring father, and to keep up their interest as Jay receives a mysterious phone call after taking the baby home (cf. *Fireproof* 87) and subsequently sets out on a dangerous journey through the city, hoping to find a cure for the baby's condition. Even though it is clear that this goal is unrealistic and could only be achieved by supernatural powers, the main plotline follows Wolf's principle of interestingness. However, there are also several text passages that do not drive the action forward but focus on Jay's thought processes. In addition, the main (and mostly chronological) plotline is interrupted several times by footnotes that present the individual stories of the dead characters introduced in the opening statement, which poses problems with regard to Wolf's principle of perspectivity and the adequacy of the medium. What becomes clear from these considerations is that it is difficult to classify the novel as either realist or experimental. In contrast to Bhagat's novel, *Fireproof* certainly displays many more experimental features, ranging from elements of magical realism to multimodality. Nevertheless, the main plotline is mostly told in a realist manner, putting the novel in an in-between category. The discussion of the other novels chosen for this study will demonstrate that they cannot easily be classified as realist or experimental either. While Wolf's principles are useful to analyse in what respects a text may deviate from a conventional understanding of realism, they do not sufficiently explain the possible impact of texts that do not clearly fall into either of the two categories.

## 2.2 The Effects of a Focus on Experientiality

In *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology*, Monika Fludernik also draws attention to the difficulties of classifying a work of fiction as 'realist.' Her study offers a historical survey of narrative techniques, using examples ranging from oral storytelling to experimental fiction to illustrate that "[n]arrative at its fullest manifestation [...] correlates with human experientiality" (Fludernik 311). She points out in the introduction to her study that "[i]t will be argued that oral narratives (more precisely: narratives of spontaneous conversational storytelling) cognitively correlate with perceptual parameters of human experience and that these parameters remain in force even in more sophisticated written narratives, although the textual make-up of these stories changes drastically over time" (Fludernik 12). Additionally, "[u]nlike the traditional models of narratology, narrativity [...] is here constituted by [...] experientiality, namely by the quasi-mimetic evocation of 'real-life experience'" (Fludernik 12). She further adds that "[t]he term '*natural*' is not applied to texts or textual techniques but exclusively to the *cognitive*

*frames* by means of which texts are interpreted” (Fludernik 9, emphasis in the original). In the light of this notion of experientiality, she argues that “[r]ealism [...] links up with an individual’s very personal experience and the verisimilar rendering of it in the text” (Fludernik 37). In other words, “[r]ealism [...] therefore closely corresponds to a mimetic representation of individual experience that cognitively and epistemically relies on real-world knowledge” (Fludernik 38). Her focus on the presentation of human experience leads her to a different assessment of basic narratological categories concerning plot structure and narrative technique. Various techniques may be suitable to express individual experiences, and even those that critics often consider unnatural are compatible with her understanding of experientiality. Maximilian Alders, for instance, points out in terms of the omniscient narrator that “[t]he omnipresence and omniperception of the omniscient narrator derive from his unnatural mode of being, which is characterized by the oddity that the narrator possesses comprehensive intradiegetic experientiality while, in addition, conveying this ‘knowledge’ from an extradiegetic ontological sphere” (344). However, Fludernik notes that “[t]he authorial narrator’s more extended omniscience regarding the space and time of the action does not pose any problems in relation to natural parameters: it can be accounted for easily within the traditional function of the historian as a compiler and accumulator of traditional lore and a recensor of earlier versions of the story” (167). She adds that “[n]arratorial omniscience in the authorial mode is certainly unavailable to real narrators in natural interaction; yet it is the kind of privilege that one most wishes a narrator to have, since it affords the reader the comforting illusion of reliability, objectivity and absolute knowledge” (Fludernik 167-68). Hence, even though authorial narration is unlikely to be found in natural interaction, there are ways of explaining it, and it is the most comforting option for readers as it may easily draw them into the illusion of the text in Wolf’s sense. Additionally, “[k]nowing what happened at the same time in a different place or what events led up to a specific situation does not violate expected natural frames to the same extent as reading people’s minds [...]” (Fludernik 167). In this respect, Fludernik continues to examine the technique of internal focalisation, pointing out that “[t]he real break with natural parameters occurs in the invention of preponderantly figural narrative, of internal focalization, where narratorial knowledge can no longer be anchored in the pieties of received morality and serves to replicate well-proven psychological insights relying on everyday experience and guesswork” (167). Jan Alber supports this view, arguing that “[t]he reflector-mode narratives of literary modernism radicalise the unnatural tendencies of ‘omniscient’ narration insofar as instances of mind-reading or telepathy become more and more dominant and typically dominate the narrative as a whole” (144). However, when

Fludernik also addresses Stanzel's distinction between teller and reflector mode in her subchapter on the consciousness novel (cf. 169), she notes that "[a]lthough reflectoral narrative, from one point of view, is the most 'unnatural' (Cohn 1990: 791) type of narration, from the cognitive perspective it recuperates one of the prime natural frames of human experiencing and therefore naturalizes the unnatural [...] to perfection" (170). She explains this in more detail by arguing that "[b]y getting an inside view of characters' minds we come to appreciate their motives and are more likely to find the story convincing and true to life. If we follow the meanderings of a mind as it observes the world, we are led to empathize with the protagonist and are apt to savour the privilege of mind-reading under the microscope" (Fludernik 177). Fludernik's arguments make it clear that the narrative techniques that could not occur in real-life conversation, for instance an authorial narrative situation and reflector mode, actually appear to be natural to the reader as they either closely reflect human experience or resemble, for example, the work of a historian, who compiles important information of past events. Even narratives in the second person, which are usually considered unnatural, turn out to be compatible with Fludernik's conception of experientiality: "Second-person fiction, even texts with *one* and *it*, especially when deployed in reflector-mode narration, do not really create any serious problems: the *you*-protagonist is clearly an experiencer, and in some kinds of second-person narrative a quasi-realist situation of address may be projected" (Fludernik 249, emphasis in the original). Even though it might, on the whole, be problematic to equate experientiality with narrativity, Fludernik's study is important as it indicates that experientiality should at least be considered an essential element of narrative.

This results in a reinterpretation of some of the principles that, in Wolf's view, realist narratives should follow to qualify as such. For instance, Fludernik argues that "experientiality both subsumes and marginalizes plot. Events or actantial and motivational parameters in and of themselves constitute only a zero degree of narrativity, a minimal frame for the production of experientiality" (311). In the chapter that is devoted to an examination of postmodern techniques, Fludernik offers the following explanation for her neglect of plot-related concerns: "As I have been arguing in this book, narrativity can be defined in terms of experiential parameters rather than merely on the basis of chronological event-related features. A disruption in chronology or event consistency [sic] does not therefore radically affect narrativity unless the inconsistency results in a downright failure to re-cognize a fictional situation" (270). She adds that a non-chronological presentation of events does not necessarily affect narrativity because, "[a]fter all, 'real life' is a puzzle too; you don't get 'your story' presented to you by an authorial narrator who spoonfeeds you with reliable information. One reconstructs the case, albeit

imperfectly, from disparate sources, and sometimes one has to follow up on initially unpromising leads” (Fludernik 270). In terms of postmodern literature in particular, she later adds that “[a]lthough all (post)modern texts most certainly have *discourse* reference (with or without a teller figure), what precisely (if anything) is their *story* (or plot) frequently cannot be delineated with any clarity. Events and stories are simply no longer central to the focus of what these texts are about” (Fludernik 335, emphasis in the original). An enhanced focus on experientiality explains, for instance, why a plotless stream-of-consciousness novel does not necessarily create anti-illusionistic effects. As Alber adds, “[t]oday, unnatural narrative techniques such as psychonarration, free indirect discourse, or direct thought (i.e., strategies of mind reading that do not exist as such in the real world) no longer strike us as odd or strange; rather, we can easily accept them as part of the projected worlds in modernist novels” (145). He further explains “that our curiosity about the hidden secrets and private thoughts of others is the ultimate root of the conventionalisation of such impossible instances of mind reading. For example, we would all like to know what others really think about us so that the idea of penetrating the minds of others is not exactly far-fetched” (Alber 149). What will become clear from the discussions offered in this study is that a plotless stream-of-consciousness novel or an a-chronological plotline as such is indeed not a problem for contemporary readers. What is more likely to strike readers as odd are, in fact, sudden and inexplicable breaks in terms of structure or narrative technique, for instance a switch from a first-person to an authorial narrator, or the switch to a plotline that is not connected to the rest of the novel.

Such structural breaks have a specific, mostly confusing, effect on the reader; in most cases, the literary illusion is broken and the reader is asked to interact with the text in a more active fashion. As Emanuela Patti also notes in terms of experimental writing and the impact it may have on the reader,

[i]n spite of their differences, what most experimental narratives share is how they challenge the reader’s experience. With traditional printed books, the sequence of events and the content of the novels are decided by the author, and readers are expected to follow the narrative in a linear way from the first page of the book until the end, linearity and a pre-determined pathway of reading being the key features of the traditional book format. (3)

In this context, the reinterpretation of Fludernik’s concept of experientiality that Marco Caracciolo, inspired by cognitive narrative theory, offers in his study *The Experientiality of Narrative: An Enactivist Approach* is worth considering as it proposes that experientiality arises from the reader’s interaction with the text instead of being intrinsic to it, as Fludernik seems to argue. Relying on definitions found in narratological studies by Werner Wolf, Marie-Laure

Ryan and David Herman, Caracciolo first identifies the following elements as the main characteristics of narrative:

A semiotic object is likely to be understood as a story when 1. it prompts recipients to construct a storyworld populated by characters and structured around a specific temporal-causal logic (plot); 2. it possesses a certain degree of thematic coherence; 3. it relates events that deviate from recipients' expectations, thus acquiring 'tellability' (see Baroni 2013); 4. it focuses on the experiences and evaluations of one or more anthropomorphic entities. (32)

What is most interesting about this definition is that "[t]hese narratemes cut across the distinction between representation and experience, with factors 1. and 2. seemingly leaning toward representation, factor 3. siding with experience, and factor 4. somewhat in between" (Caracciolo 32). As Caracciolo argues, "[c]learly distinguishing between representation and experience enables us to grasp how complex and multifaceted recipients' engagement with narrative artifacts is, accounting for a broad range of responses and interpretive patterns" (32). In his view, it is problematic that literary scholars mostly seem to neglect readers' experiences when discussing the representation of consciousness and only consider the way the experiences of the fictional characters are portrayed (cf. Caracciolo 38-39). Referring to Fludernik's study, Caracciolo therefore argues that "[...] Fludernik's definition seems to construe experientiality as a property of narrative rather than as something that 'happens' in the text-reader interaction [...]" (47). He adds that "even if engaging with narrative does involve mental representations of some sort, its experientiality cannot be understood in representational, object-based terms. Instead, we should think of experientiality as a kind of network that involves, minimally, the recipient of a narrative, his or her experiential background, and the expressive strategies adopted by the author" (Caracciolo 49). Hence, "[a]t the root of experientiality is, then, the tension between the textual design and the recipient's experiential background" (Caracciolo 49).

Caracciolo starts his line of argument by differentiating between the dimension of representation and the dimension of experience in narrative texts, intending to explore the relationship between the two in more detail. In this respect, he puts forward two theses:

[...] first, recipients' engagement with narrative involves representations but cannot be equated with them. The story-driven experience, as I will call it, exists in a network of responses that includes recipients' past experiences as well as the text itself [...]. Second, characters' consciousness and experiences cannot be represented as such by narrative texts; what we commonly call the 'representation of an experience' is the representation of an *event* in which a person (e.g., a fictional character) undergoes an experience [...]. (Caracciolo 30, emphasis in the original)

He then explains his view in more detail, noting that “[r]epresentation works by referring to object-like entities (such as events, people, and things), while experience is a complex texture created by people’s biological make-up and past experiences; it has to do not just with *what* is experienced, but with the *how*, with the ways in which people respond to the world” (Caracciolo 30, emphasis in the original). This does not mean “that mental representations do not exist – it only entails that experiences are not *just* mental representations” (Caracciolo 35, emphasis in the original). Caracciolo summarises the relationship between representation and experience as follows:

In sum, representation and expression are different layers or aspects of the same process of engaging with texts. Language is inherently representational, because it asks interpreters to think about – or direct their consciousness to – mental objects like events and existents. But it is also experiential, because it can *express* experiences by constantly referring back to the past experiences of the interpreters, and by inviting them to respond in certain ways. Note that representation does not come in degrees: something is representational or not (and language always is). By contrast, the experiences created by stories vary considerably in intensity, depending on the strength of interpreters’ responses, which in turn reflect the tension between their past experiences and the textual design [...]. (38, emphasis in the original)

In terms of this textual design, Caracciolo argues that there are specific textual features, namely ‘expressive devices,’ that determine the degree of experientiality. Certain representational or stylistic choices have a greater potential to trigger experiential responses in the recipient than others (cf. Caracciolo 41). In Caracciolo’s words, “[t]hese devices can give readers’ engagement with the text a distinct experiential ‘feel,’ often drawing on a level of readers’ interaction with the world that is pre-linguistic and non-propositional” (41-42). These expressive devices are likely to trigger specific reactions in the reader but do not fully determine them (cf. Caracciolo 42). Caracciolo adds that “[t]his means that the same expressive device can trigger reactions that are different both in quality and in intensity, depending on readers’ experiential background” (42). In the following, he outlines the nature of these expressive devices and explains their particular functions. He first argues that expressive devices may operate at the story level, explaining that “some events and existents are more likely than others to generate experiential responses, because of evolutionary, cultural or personal predispositions” (Caracciolo 42). In order to illustrate his point, he cites the example of an animal that is dying of an infected wound, arguing that most readers will feel disgusted to varying degrees (cf. Caracciolo 42) and concluding that “[h]ere, then, the choice to represent something is almost inevitably bound up with a certain *way* of reacting to that representation” (Caracciolo 42, emphasis in the original). Further, specific cultural patterns (‘masterplots’) may also influence the degree of experientiality of a story (cf. Caracciolo 42-43), or “[i]n other

words: by resonating with the socio-cultural background shared by a group of recipients, the stories that draw on these masterplots will tend to elicit stronger responses from them” (Caracciolo 42-43). As Caracciolo later adds, “[t]o the extent that the recipients of a story share the same background, the story-driven experiences that they undergo while engaging with it will be essentially similar. But past a certain point every recipient’s personal experience will start to matter, accounting for individual responses to the story” (64-65). Caracciolo’s last point in this section about the story level is the idea that “some representational choices function as expressive devices because they tie in with the personal experience of individual recipients” (43), meaning that a narrated situation may have a greater effect on readers if they have experienced a similar incident in real life (cf. 43).

The next group of expressive devices that Caracciolo identifies operates at the level of discourse. In addition to stylistic choices (cf. Caracciolo 43), “the author’s or narrator’s explicit evaluation of the story he or she is telling” (Caracciolo 43) may significantly influence the degree of experientiality. Further, “authorial evaluations index the teller’s experience *and* encourage recipients to take a stance by either sharing the teller’s evaluation [...] or by reacting to it” (Caracciolo 43, emphasis in the original). Another device is ‘mind style,’ referring to the subjectivity of the characters, which means “that the experiences and evaluations being expressed (and therefore coupled with readers’ reactions) are not those of the author, but those attributed by readers to a fictional character” (Caracciolo 44).

Caracciolo’s last category refers to narrative structure, which may trigger suspense, curiosity or surprise, depending on the development and intersection of different plotlines (cf. 44). After explaining how these responses could be triggered in the reader, Caracciolo adds that “it is important to stress that suspense, surprise, and curiosity are far from being specific to narrative: people can feel them toward real events, too, and in fact the double temporality of storytelling seems to build on the human mind’s capacity to detach itself from the here and now, projecting itself either into the future (suspense) or into the past (surprise and curiosity)” (44).

It is important to note once more that “experientiality comes in different degrees, depending both on the story’s capacity to recruit experiential traces, meanings, and values that are part of interpreters’ background and on the strength of interpreters’ responses to the story and to its characters” (Caracciolo 50-51). Hence, “if a story draws on recipients’ background in a way that prompts them to react very strongly (through sensory imaginings, emotions, and socio-cultural evaluations), then the story will score high on a scale of experientiality” (Caracciolo 51). What is most important about Caracciolo’s categorisation is that it indicates

that both content and narrative form influence this degree of experientiality and the way a reader reacts to a literary text.

The comparison of a text passage from *The Three Mistakes of My Life* to one from *Fireproof* will demonstrate to what extent narrative form may determine the degree of experientiality that arises from the interaction between reader and text. The passage taken from *The Three Mistakes of My Life* portrays the death of Omi, who is tragically killed in the violent confrontation with his uncle towards the end of the novel:

‘Mama, don’t do it,’ Omi said, still unaware that the trishul blades had penetrated five inches inside him.

‘Omi, my son,’ Mama said.

Omi writhed in pain as Mama yanked the trishul out.

I had never seen so much blood. I wanted to puke. My mind went numb. The man who pinned Omi earlier now held Ali tight and came close to Mama. Mama had Omi in his lap.

‘Look you animal, what did you do,’ Ish screamed. Ish had seen the scene from behind. He never saw the trishul inside him. Only I had seen, and for years later that image would continue to haunt me.

‘Call an ambulance you dogs,’ Ish screamed. Ish’s captor held him super-tight.

Ali put his free hand on Omi’s chest. It moved up and down in an asymmetrical manner. Omi held Ali’s hand and looked at me. His eyes looked weak. Tears ran across my cheeks [...]. I had no energy left to do anything.

‘Leave us you bastards,’ I cried like a baby.

‘You’ll be fine my son, I didn’t mean to,’ Mama said as he brushed Omi’s hair.

‘He is a good boy Mama, he didn’t kill your son. All Muslims are not bad,’ Omi said, his voice breaking as he gulped for breath.

‘Love you friend,’ Omi said as he looked at me, a line that could be termed cheesy if it wasn’t his last. His eyes closed. (*The Three Mistakes of My Life* 243-44)

Like the rest of the novel, this scene of Omi’s death is written in a realist manner, drawing readers into the textual world and making it easy for them to identify with the situation. As the passage depicts the killing of a character, it is likely to generate a strong experiential response in the reader. According to Caracciolo’s theory, this is an expressive device that operates at the story level. The reactions of different readers are likely to be similar; they may feel sorry for Omi, become angry with the attacker, and are most likely shocked and unable to believe that this tragic incident has really happened. Of course, the intensity of the reactions may differ from reader to reader, depending on their personal backgrounds. If readers have been in a similar situation themselves, they will be more shocked and affected than somebody who has only seen such an incident in a film or heard about it on the news. But even though there are individual factors involved, the same basic reactions are likely to be triggered in recipients with the same cultural background, as Caracciolo has argued in his study. However, it is not only the fact that somebody has been killed that triggers these responses; the way the scene is depicted is just as

important for triggering a certain reaction in the reader. The realist manner of Bhagat's novel creates illusionistic images, which make readers feel as if they are part of the situation, and the incident is logically connected to the preceding events, which influences the response of the reader just as much as the content itself does.

The following text passage from *Fireproof* is also concerned with the death of an innocent character but may trigger different responses in the reader for various reasons:

I am Doctor 2, I was twenty-eight, I was born in this city, I did my MBBS from Osmania University in Hyderabad [...], my mother told me not to go to work this morning because she had heard on TV the news of the attack on the train and how everyone said they feared trouble but the hospital had arranged for a van to drop us off home that night and I thought that would be very safe but it didn't work out that way, the last thing I remember is Doctor 1 telling me to be quiet, a dozen people stopping the van, asking the driver our names, then letting the driver run away, I remember trying to open the van but they broke the windscreen, I could smell the kerosene being poured in, my glasses were the first to catch the heat, I could smell my hair get singed, I felt the skin peel and then it was all over, pretty fast, and now all I think of is what happens to my sister and my mother [...]. (*Fireproof* 49)

At first sight, this passage from *Fireproof* does not seem to differ considerably from the scene of Omi's death. It is also written in a realist manner and also reports the killing of an innocent character. What is different is the fact that Doctor 2 is dead when he is telling his story. But even though this point may confuse the reader as it contradicts Wolf's principle of 'Sinnzentriertheit,' it is not the main reason for the recipient's different reaction. What is more striking than the realisation that the story is told by a dead character is the fact that the passage, in contrast to the scene from Bhagat's novel, is not integrated into the main narrative but deliberately presented by a different narrator in a footnote, thus also contradicting Wolf's principle of perspectivity. As Caracciolo has noted, there are expressive devices that concern the structure of the narrative and may trigger specific emotions in the reader, or at least intensify them. Recipients are surely surprised when the main plotline of Jay's visit to the hospital is interrupted by the stories of the dead characters, even though this circumstance is already announced in the opening statement. The switch is unexpected and even though the description of how the doctor died may also trigger feelings of sympathy, anger and shock in the reader (like the passage from Bhagat's novel), the fact that the story is presented in a footnote considerably influences the recipient's response. If the story of the dead doctor were integrated into the main narrative, the reader's reaction would certainly be different. For instance, if Jay heard the dead doctor talking to him while sitting in the hospital, the scenario would also trigger confusion or surprise, but, after all, most readers may, for example, have seen horror movies about ghosts or heard of people who suffer from hallucinations. As it is readers' first reaction to try to make sense of a scenario that contradicts the rules of the world they experience

themselves every day, they may search for answers in the realm of fantasy or think of a mental illness of the experiencer. Similar interpretations are possible in the case of the footnote, but they turn out to be far more problematic as the dead character is talking to the reader directly and the incident cannot be attributed to a specific experiencer in the fictional world. Again, there will be individual differences depending on the reader's personal background and imagination, but what becomes clear is that both content and form influence the reaction that is triggered in the recipient. A text that is completely fragmented and anti-illusionistic in terms of content and form may confuse readers from the beginning until the end, or somehow manage to draw them into its confusing world. The novels that will be analysed in this study, on the other hand, do contain structural breaks but are not completely fragmented or anti-illusionistic, so that the reader is, most of the time, able to make sense of the narrated events. Trying to classify a text as a whole as either realist or experimental (two terms whose meanings and implications have additionally changed considerably over time) is not a useful endeavour in this context as it does not help to explain the potentials of novels that combine features of both realms. For this purpose, it is necessary to focus on the effects that are created when seemingly realist and experimental features interact with each other, and to discuss the impact this interaction has on the mediation of a text's content.

### **2.3 A Definition of Form(s)**

The aim of this chapter is to develop a suitable theory to describe and analyse these structural breaks, or incompatible forms, without relying on problematic terms such as 'realist,' 'natural,' or 'experimental.' In this context, Caroline Levine's study *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* is of particular importance as it tries to offer an answer to the question of how form should be seen in relation to content and other forms. Levine proposes that "[t]he first major goal of [...] [her] book is to show that forms are everywhere structuring and patterning experience, and that this carries serious implications for understanding political communities" (16). Her study therefore "makes a case for expanding our usual definition of form in literary studies to include patterns of sociopolitical experience [...]" (Levine 2). In her introduction, Levine further argues that "form has never belonged only to the discourse of aesthetics. It does not originate in the aesthetic, and the arts cannot lay claim to either the longest or the most far-reaching history of the term" (2). She adds that "'form' always indicates an *arrangement of elements – an ordering, patterning, or shaping*" (Levine 3, emphasis in the original). She justifies her aim to offer an extended definition of form by arguing that "politics involves

activities of ordering, patterning, and shaping. And if the political is a matter of imposing and enforcing boundaries, temporal patterns, and hierarchies on experience, then there is no politics without form” (Levine 3).

The aim of this chapter is to transfer the ideas of her extended sociopolitical concept of form back into the context of literary analysis to explain the potentials that different narrative forms have. For this purpose, it is first necessary to consider Levine’s five basic assumptions about what forms do: forms constrain, forms differ, various forms overlap and intersect, forms travel, and forms do political work in particular historical contexts (cf. 4-5). Accordingly, she comes up with the following proposal: “Forms: *containing, plural, overlapping, portable, and situated*. None of these ideas about form are themselves new, but putting them together will bring us to a new theory of form” (Levine 6, emphasis in the original). She then intends to borrow the concept of ‘affordance’ from design theory, “a term used to describe the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs” (Levine 6). In terms of literature, it is clear that different literary forms have different potentials or functions; for instance, a poem has other main potentials than a narrative in prose (cf. Levine 6), and the same applies to any form that can be found in other contexts as well. In the course of her introduction, Levine additionally outlines the main characteristics of forms in more detail. She argues that, “[i]n any given circumstance, no form operates in isolation” (Levine 7), and later adds that “[e]very literary form [...] generates its own, separate logic” (Levine 10). Additionally, “as they move, forms bring their limited range of affordances with them. No matter how different their historical and cultural circumstances, that is, bounded enclosures will always exclude, and rhyme will always repeat” (Levine 7). In other words, “[e]ach of these forms can be repeated elsewhere, and each carries with it a certain limited range of affordances as it travels” (Levine 11). As forms are never isolated and work according to their own rules and “on different scales, as small as punctuation marks and as vast as multiplot narratives or national boundaries” (Levine 13), it is necessary to examine how they relate to and interact with each other. As Levine argues in this context, “[f]orms will often fail to impose their order when they run up against other forms that disrupt their logic and frustrate their organizing ends, producing aleatory and sometimes contradictory effects” (7). Hence, “[i]n many cases, when forms meet, their collision produces unexpected consequences, results that cannot always be traced back to deliberate intentions or dominant ideologies” (Levine 8). She adds that “no form, however seemingly powerful, causes, dominates, or organizes all others. This means that literary forms can lay claim to an efficacy of their own. They do not simply reflect or contain prior political realities” (Levine 16). According to this definition, literary forms must be understood as elements that actively shape

the content instead of just reflecting it. Further, “[a]s different forms struggle to impose their order on our experience, working at different scales of our experience, aesthetic and political forms emerge as comparable patterns that operate on a common plane” (Levine 16). Levine’s statements indicate that the dimensions of aesthetics and politics do not form an opposition but effectively complement each other in order to achieve a specific goal. In terms of literature in particular, this implies that narrative form and content should be understood as two equally strong forces that mutually influence each other and work towards the same goal. This is possible as both form and content play an active role in shaping readers’ perceptions of the text by triggering specific reactions and emotions in them.

At this point, it is important to clarify what elements of a literary text may be understood as forms and how these forms interact with each other. In the following, the most important ideas about form that Levine offers will be redefined for the purpose of literary analysis. The basic assumption is that the novel as a whole has one particular form which is made up of many smaller forms that could be endlessly divided into even smaller ones. For instance, chapter divisions shape the form of the novel as a whole and operate on a large scale, whereas punctuation operates on a smaller scale. In the context of this study, the aspects of form that are of particular interest include plot structure, narrative technique, metafictional comments, punctuation, and visual elements, such as pictures, layout and font. In this respect, it is important to take a closer look at the concept of multimodality, which is “in its most fundamental sense [...] the coexistence of more than one semiotic mode within a given context. More generally, multimodality is an everyday reality. It is the experience of living; we experience everyday life in multimodal terms through sight, sound, movement” (*Multimodality* 8), as Alison Gibbons describes the concept in her study. Additionally, “taking the inclusion of images for granted” (*Multimodality* 2), Gibbons outlines the most important features of multimodal literature as follows:

- (1) Unusual textual layouts and page design.
- (2) Varied typography.
- (3) Use of colour in both type and imagistic content.
- (4) Concrete realisation of text to create images, as in concrete poetry.
- (5) Devices that draw attention to the text’s materiality, including metafictional writing.
- (6) Footnotes and self-interrogative critical voices.
- (7) Flipbook sections.
- (8) Mixing of genres, both in literary terms, such as horror, and in terms of visual effect, such as newspaper clippings and play dialogue. (*Multimodality* 2)

All of these multimodal features can, generally speaking, be understood as forms since they structure the text in a specific way and therefore also shape the reader’s perception of it, even though it is not easy to categorise different modes, as Gibbons notes in her analysis. With reference to a study by Charles Forceville, Gibbons points out that, “[i]nitially, Forceville turns

to the sensory perceptual system for categorisation, thus modes are connected to each of the five senses. For a cognitive approach, this seems to provide a useful foundation for understanding and identifying modes, yet nevertheless it is not without problem [...]” (*Multimodality* 9). She adds that “[t]his is because connecting modes ‘one-on-one’ with each of the five senses is too generalising and overlooks crucial differences between signifying systems” (Gibbons, *Multimodality* 9). She explains this in more detail, arguing that, “[f]or instance, the visual mode would encapsulate both written communication (which is verbal) and pictorial communication (which is imagistic), and evidently these two forms do not convey meaning through the same means. As such, the question ‘what is a mode?’ is a slippery one” (Gibbons, *Multimodality* 9). Even though it is obviously difficult to categorise modes according to the five senses, the important point is that multimodal features have the potential to address various channels in the first place and may therefore enhance the intensity of the emotions that are triggered in the reader.

Additionally, Nina Nørgaard makes the important observation that “[e]ven though the term ‘multimodality’ would appear to imply the existence of ‘monomodes’ and ‘monomodality,’ it is important to realize that no such thing exists” (116). She explains that, “[a]ccording to Kress and van Leeuwen (2001), all communication is multimodal, thus also written verbal language since this mode consists not of wording only, but has a visual side to it, i.e., typography, which in turn consists of submodes such as shape and color” (Nørgaard 116). In the context of this study, such submodes will be understood as subforms, which are part of larger units but nevertheless have the potential to play an active role in shaping the recipient’s perception of the text, depending on how they interact with the other forms in their environment. Gibbons also adds that “[m]ultimodal literature as a genre is not uniform, but rather exists on a spectrum, from minimal to extensive in the level of incorporation of multimodality” (“Multimodal Literature” 420). The number of multimodal features included in a text may have a considerable impact on the reading experience as it determines the number of structural breaks, or clashes of forms, that have the potential to increase the text’s experientiality in the sense Caracciolo uses the term. In the following analysis, the different features of multimodality will be understood as either subforms, which shape the larger forms in which they are situated even though they are not autonomous themselves (for instance, colour, font and punctuation), or as small-scale forms, which are also part of larger units but must be understood as autonomous forms (for instance, letters that are inserted into the text).

Of course, there are different ways to categorise and divide up the forms that structure a text. The main aim, or the first step, is to identify units that harmonise as a whole since its

various subforms also harmonise with each other. For instance, in the case of *Fireproof*, the main plotline can be understood as one large-scale form and the story of the doctor as another one. The story that Jay starts telling could, roughly speaking, be considered one harmonising unit as the action unfolds chronologically, is presented by a first-person narrator without any unexpected switches in focalisation, and, on a smaller level, is punctuated properly. As this plotline is mostly presented in chronological order, it makes it easy for the reader to follow the action and Jay's thoughts, one of the affordances of such linear plots. The large-scale forms that are discernible at first sight are additionally shaped by subforms, which might be less conspicuous but also shape the reader's perception of the text. Hence, any pattern that has the potential to shape the text in a specific way can be considered a form. The stories the dead characters present in the footnotes can also be understood as harmonising units that make sense in themselves and follow their own logic. For instance, Doctor 2 first introduces himself, provides details on his background and then informs the reader about the events leading up to his death. In addition, the stories of the dead disregard conventional punctuation rules and are written in a different font. The punctuation is particularly striking as each story is, in fact, one sentence that is only divided by commas. Such subforms harmonise with the arrangement of the footnotes in the sense that they help to set them clearly apart from the story of the main plotline Jay is telling. Additionally, such subforms have an impact on recipients' reading experience as the unconventional punctuation enhances their feeling of confusion, makes them focus their attention on the content of the footnote and forces them to continue reading. Recipients are therefore forced to listen to the reports of the crimes that have been committed against the victims, who did not have a voice when they were still alive. This demonstrates how different forms may harmonise with each other and intensify their effects when they meet. In that sense, the doctor's footnote can be considered one harmonising unit that follows its own logic but interrupts the logic of the story Jay is telling.

What the reader perceives as a structural break when Jay's story is interrupted by the footnotes should be understood as a clash of two different forms that are not causally connected to each other, are presented by different narrators and even differ in terms of font. As Levine has pointed out, forms never operate in isolation and all kinds of forms may interact with each other and produce unexpected effects when they meet. It is therefore not possible for one form to fully dominate or control another one; instead, they mutually influence each other and either harmonise or disrupt each other to varying degrees, which causes specific, mostly unexpected, outcomes. This is why text passages in which two seemingly disparate forms meet or even clash are of particular interest for this study. These clashes may range from inexplicable switches of

perspective and interrupted plotlines to the insertion of visual elements and unusual punctuation, all of which have a specific impact on the reader. The reactions that are triggered by the clash of two forms may vary considerably, ranging from extreme confusion to an enhanced identification of the reader with the situation presented in the textual world. In the chosen example, the logic Jay's story follows is broken when the footnote is inserted into the text. This clash of forms disrupts the chronology and surprises the reader, who will most likely be confused and encouraged to reflect on this unconventional structure of the novel.

The basic assumption therefore is that all forms have the potential to either harmonise with other forms to varying degrees or to clash with them. This applies to both large-scale forms, small-scale forms and subforms. Generally speaking, a form that is situated within a larger one should be understood as a small-scale form, whereas subforms usually operate on an even smaller level and would normally not be understood as autonomous units. Hence, both large-scale forms and small-scale forms could be shaped by subforms, for instance (unconventional) punctuation or font. According to this understanding, all forms that shape the text in some way can be compared to each other (even if they may operate on different scales) and analysed in relation to the content. Hence, literary texts are made up of many different forms, which embody their individual potentials and constraints, work according to their own logic and rules, and on different scales. Specific forms always have the same affordances, as Levine has pointed out, but the effect of these affordances differs from context to context. For instance, the insertion of photos may, on the one hand, enhance the potential for readers to identify with the situation and hence contribute to the creation of literary illusion. On the other hand, it may disrupt the formation of literary illusion and encourage readers' critical thinking. Another example is that first-person narration is characterised by the fact that the information the reader is provided with is limited to a character's subjective perspective. However, depending on the context, it will trigger different reactions in the reader, ranging from suspicion due to the narrator's unreliability to feelings of sympathy as it may be easy to identify with the narrator's situation. Hence, even though it is true that certain forms always have the same affordances, the effects that are created depend on the other forms they interact with in their close environment. In the case of the chosen example, both Jay and the dead characters function as homodiegetic narrators with internal focalisation. The reader first gets used to Jay's perspective and may be surprised by the sudden change of narrators when the footnotes are inserted. It triggers the sudden realisation that Jay's perspective is limited and that he is not in control of the whole narrative. Even though the reader does not yet know for sure that Jay is responsible for several of the cruelties committed against the Muslim population, the sudden

transition from one form to another creates a clear opposition between Jay and the dead characters, which already implies that there might be reason to be suspicious of him and his portrayal of events. These structural elements therefore shape the reader's perception of Jay and skillfully enhance the novel's call for justice. This demonstrates that the way forms interact with each other inevitably shapes and actively influences the text's overall message instead of just reflecting its content.

The clashes of forms that harmonise in themselves but not with each other give the novels that will be analysed in this study their 'experimental' feel. However, none of the novels, with the exception of Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess*, come across as avant-garde or extremely radical in terms of their presentation of form or content. As most of the novels consist of several large forms or units that harmonise in themselves and provide a concrete context and spatio-temporal dimension, it is mostly possible for readers to make sense of the events that are presented. However, particularly the structural breaks between these harmonising units may cause confusion and encourage recipients to think critically about what they have just read. According to this understanding, the extent to which a reader is able to make sense of a text mostly depends on the number and scale of harmonising units or forms that can be identified in the text. Two large units that harmonise with each other are more accessible than twenty small units that repeatedly clash with each other. However, twenty small units that harmonise at least to a certain degree might be easier to make sense of than two large ones that do not harmonise at all. For instance, many switches of focalisation in the course of a chronological plotline might be less likely to cause confusion than the presentation of two separate stories by the same narrator that are not connected at all. Of course, this judgement always involves a subjective dimension, but, after all, the individual experiences and backgrounds of readers will always influence their interpretations of a text as well, as Caracciolo has convincingly demonstrated. What is clear is that the way narrative forms are arranged may attract the reader's attention and encourage an active reading process. Most of the novels chosen for this study oscillate between the poles of identification, on the one hand, and the potential to encourage critical thinking, on the other hand. By identifying the various forms at play and by examining the effects of their interactions, it will become possible to explain the advantages of such narrative strategies more effectively than by relying merely on problematic terms such as 'realist' and 'experimental.'

The specific forms Levine discusses in a sociopolitical context throughout her work – whole, rhythm, hierarchy and network – can be redefined to facilitate a more systematic approach to the various types of clashing and harmonising forms that can be identified in the novels chosen for this study. If the forms Levine identifies can be found everywhere and

actively shape everyday experiences, they may be projected onto a narrative's formal level as well in an attempt to point to the constructedness of reality and the different ways in which humans may perceive their environments, which may not be afforded sufficiently by the narrative's content. As Filippo Menozzi notes with reference to *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, "the concept of 'reality' itself is highly contradictory and problematic: rather than resembling the coherence of a plot, reality is made up of discordant, dissonant elements that cross each other and fight against each other" (29). Hence, the aim is to make Levine's ideas fruitful for the purpose of literary analysis in order to examine the affordances of specific narrative forms and the way they interact with each other to show how reality is constructed. Levine draws attention to how forms may interact with each other in the context of her analysis of the TV series *The Wire*, arguing that "none of these [forms] is primary or basic: each can be nested inside the other – wholes can contain rhythms and hierarchies networks. In fact, *The Wire* helps us to see how interdependent these forms must always be" (136-37). In order to understand how exactly the different forms depend on and interact with each other in written narratives in particular, it will be necessary to first define the affordances of each of the individual forms. In this respect, it is important to keep in mind that this study is based on the assumption that narrative forms are also fluid and flexible entities that can be situated within each other (and may then be understood as small-scale forms), and potentially also change their appearance. This means that each type of form may be part of any other type of form, and that, for instance, horizontal forms may be transformed into vertical ones, or that wholes may be broken up into smaller units and afterwards be put together again.

At the beginning of her chapter on the concept of wholes, Levine points out the following: "Totality. Unity. Containment. Wholeness. For many critics, these words are synonymous with form itself. To speak of *the* form of a work of art is to gesture to its unifying power, its capacity to hold together disparate parts" (24, emphasis in the original). However, this understanding of form might be particularly problematic with reference to narratives that are characterised by several clashes of forms, for instance in terms of narrative technique. Tyler Bradway also notes in this context that, "[l]ike all literature, experimental writing is never composed of just one form; it is shaped by the mixture, overlay, and collision of multiple forms, each with their own affordances" (3). Even though it is true that all narratives are shaped by several forms, there may be a stronger sense of wholeness in linear and conventionally written novels, mediated by one homodiegetic or heterodiegetic narrator who is able to provide a comprehensive overview of the novel's main events, answer the main questions and hence achieve closure at the end of the narrative, as earlier shown in the analysis of *The Three*

*Mistakes of My Life*. Less conventionally written narratives, which may be characterised by non-linearity or frequent switches of perspectives, and hence a lower degree of mediation, such as particularly the novels analysed in the third chapter of this study, seem to create wholeness in a different fashion. In such fragmented works, a sense of wholeness may be created merely on the basis of loose connections of several smaller pieces or fragments that may display their own characteristics and could potentially exist on their own. Hence, there seems to be a shift from narrative wholeness to textual wholeness. The creation of this new type of wholeness requires the reader's active participation and willingness to accept that wholeness is not necessarily dependent on narrative closure in the conventional sense. In this context, Staffan Carlshamre points out in an essay on happy endings that it is always problematic to create a definite sense of closure. He argues that

[i]n reality there are events, tied together by temporal and causal relations, but there are no starting points and no end points – it just goes on. We often get a glimpse of the true state of things just at the moment when we are taken in by a happy ending – by the happy couple getting married or taking off on the bus, as at the end of *The Graduate*. What then? – we ask ourselves, and picture the series of days and nights with no special meaning or purpose that will follow that special day, a day that seemed special only by rolling a vague but perfect future into an illusory ball. (48)

Hence, the concept of closure may be problematic in all sorts of narratives. Additionally, it is obvious that many of the novels chosen for this study deliberately defy closure at the end and/or a sense of wholeness during the course of the narrative in favour of a large number of perspectives and stories existing next to each other, which may convey a better impression of the constructedness of reality than would a linear narrative that artificially intends to provide answers to all open questions.

## **2.4 Forms in Recent Indian Fiction in English**

This redefinition of wholeness and pluralisation of forms may correspond with the social realities that can be observed particularly in India and that are also projected onto the novels' content levels. Several scholars draw attention to the large number of social contrasts in their studies on contemporary Indian society. Knut A. Jacobsen, for instance, points out in the introduction to the *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary India* that "India is one of the most diverse and pluralistic nations in the world in terms of official languages, cultures, religions and social identities. It has throughout history been a meeting place for a large number of different cultures, languages, religions, traditions of art and ideologies that have continually been

transformed and adapted to new circumstances” (1). Rekha Datta additionally notes in her study on the historical and contemporary complexities of Indian society that “India is undoubtedly one of the most fascinating countries in the world. For centuries, people around the world have cherished its historical and cultural richness. It is the land of *sadhus* (ascetics) and scientists; of color and contrasts” (2, emphasis in the original). She adds that, “[u]nderstandably, India’s multifaceted and complex trajectory of changes and challenges has perplexed many. To anyone visiting India or learning about the country, the enigmatic nature of India’s progress seems baffling. State-of-the-art, high-rise buildings coexist with slums” (Rekha Datta 4). She further addresses the experiences she has had herself during a trip to India with a group of college students:

The contrasting landscape of India is fascinating. History coexists with contemporary reality in a working alignment. Cultural diversity lends color and beauty but has also been the source of occasional and sometimes lingering tension among groups. The gap between the rich and the poor was visible even during a casual stroll along the city sidewalks. Cows and cars jostle for space on the nation’s urban thoroughfares, which are heavily bottlenecked with the chaotic influx of imported and locally manufactured vehicles, *auto-rickshaws*, and *rickshaws*. (Rekha Datta 4, emphasis in the original)

As it seems, this social diversity may not only be examined by the novels’ content but also by their narrative forms, meaning that the fact that Indian society is highly diverse may automatically lead to the need for a pluralisation of voices and perspectives. Hence, the clashes of forms the novels display contribute to, and reflect upon, the construction of multiple (Indian) realities. Arundhati Roy supports this impression with reference to *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*: “[...] I want to write about the air we breathe, and it has caste, gender, Kashmir, love, animals, cities, and jokes” (Roy qtd. in Gupta n.p.). Narrative fragmentation may thus be useful to reflect upon the construction of various different realities in Indian society.

The various forms that are therefore created and may or may not generate a whole are usually arranged into networks. As Levine points out in terms of networks, in contrast to other forms, “[s]prawling and spreading, networks might seem altogether formless, perhaps even the antithesis of form” (112). However, she adds that “[m]any literary and culture critics have grown interested in networks in the past decade, using the concept to describe powerful social facts, such as transnational markets, transportation, and print culture. Most have defined networks loosely and generally as ‘connectivity’” (Levine 112). However, “[w]hile it is certainly true that networks do not fit formal models of unified shape or wholeness, even apparently chaotic networks depend on surprisingly systematic ordering principles [...]” (Levine 112). On a basic level, a network can be understood as a chain of horizontally and

loosely connected elements that may convey an impression of endless continuation and expand in various directions. More precisely, two different types of networks can be identified in narratives. The first type may be found in narratives that employ episodic plot structures and multiple heterodiegetic and/or homodiegetic narrators who report the same or different events from their individual perspectives and may be largely independent of each other, as, for instance, in *The Bus Stopped* or *No God in Sight*. The second type may be found in narratives that are told by one heterodiegetic or homodiegetic narrator; this narrator presents various stories, or wholes, that are usually loosely connected to each other but could also remain independent, as in *Latitudes of Longing*. Nevertheless, not all of the wholes that may be found in a novel have to be part of a network but could also exist on their own and even oppose each other, as, for instance, in *The Gypsy Goddess*.

Narrative networks in particular may reflect upon the fact that Indian society is highly diverse, and hence also upon the necessity to examine the perspectives and living conditions of characters belonging to various different social, ethnic, political and religious groups. Narrative networks therefore also place emphasis on the relationships between characters belonging to these different groups. Minoru Mio and Abhijit Dasgupta note in this context that,

[i]n India, concepts such as ‘nation’ and ‘state’ hardly take note of aspirations of the ethnic communities, their identities, histories and territorial diversities. There is a tendency now to highlight the homogenizing nature of the Indian culture by stressing one history, one language and one social ethos. Diversity is hardly accepted as a social reality. This has adversely affected the nation-building process as ethnic groups and minorities are carving out a space for themselves. (3)

The novels’ network structures seem to be against these homogenising trends, instead stressing the plurality of identities and exploring the relationships and tensions between different social, ethnic, political and religious groups. Madhav S. Gore also notes that

[o]ne has heard so much about India being an outstanding example of a society which exemplifies the value of unity in diversity that one begins to take it for granted and to assert that this is in fact a true representation of the historic experience of our society. Yet, what we see to be happening contemporaneously in our society – whether in Kashmir or in Punjab or in the northeastern states or in Ayodhya – cannot easily be reconciled with these claims. One sees life to be full of contention and dissension, of conflict and violence, and of insurgency and terrorism. (223)

Networks may also be interspersed with multimodal features, which have the potential to develop their own dynamics and form their own, individual networks or wholes within the larger network, as, for instance, in *Fireproof*. Further, it is possible for networks, and in fact for all other forms, to exist on their own or to be integrated into a whole that may be generated by an omniscient narrator and hence display a higher degree of mediation, as in *The Ministry of*

*Utmost Happiness*. In contrast, one linear story that is narrated by one narrator but regularly or occasionally interrupted by other forms is more likely to be perceived as a whole that has been split up and whose pieces alternate with those of other wholes or forms, which will be shown in the analysis of *The Book of Chocolate Saints*. The fact that the various pieces of this linear narrative may finally be assembled into one whole and potentially achieve a sense of closure makes it less likely for them to be perceived as a network, even though it would not be impossible. Nevertheless, the pieces that make up such a whole may, in turn, be part of a larger network in which they alternate with the pieces of other wholes, as in the case of *Sleeping on Jupiter*. Hence, it is possible to perceive independent, linear stories, which may be split up into various pieces, as wholes, and the same applies to any other independent elements, often multimodal features, which may or may not be part of networks.

Additionally, wholes are often closely associated with narrative hierarchy. As Levine notes, “[i]t is not difficult to understand hierarchies, like bounded wholes and rhythms, as forms: hierarchies arrange bodies, things, and ideas according to levels of power or importance. Hierarchies rank – organizing experience into asymmetrical, discriminatory, often deeply unjust arrangements” (82). In a conventionally written novel, a narrative hierarchy is created when it features one narrator who is in charge of it and therefore has greater authority than the (other) characters. This narrator may be either homodiegetic or heterodiegetic with zero focalisation. However, a heterodiegetic narrator with internal focalisation may also establish a narrative hierarchy by granting authority to one specific character who serves as a focaliser throughout the entire narrative. Hence, narrative hierarchy and wholeness may be closely associated with each other. In less conventionally written narratives that display a high degree of structural fragmentation, separate narrative hierarchies may be established within separate, independent wholes, which may, in turn, be part of a larger network (the first type mentioned above) or exist on their own and potentially compete with each other. Many of the novels chosen for this study initially seem to establish a narrative hierarchy that may be valid throughout the entire narrative, but later on, surprisingly, introduce even more narrators who are then in charge of their individual wholes that make up a large horizontal network, as, for instance, in *The Bus Stopped*. In the case of the second type of network, one narrator maintains his superior position during the course of all of the independent or loosely connected stories he may narrate, as in *The Blue Bedspread* or *Latitudes of Longing*.

All forms may be arranged according to a specific pattern or rhythm along the vertical or horizontal axis. As Levine notes in her chapter on *Rhythm*, “[u]nlike the constraints of artful unities and rigid boundaries, rhythmic forms have often seemed natural, arising from the lived

time of the human body” (49). She further points out that, “yet, rhythm can also be punishing, the shackles of an imposed metrical or musical form” (Levine 49). Additionally, “[r]hythms, if we define the term broadly, are pervasive. From shift work and travel timetables to religious rituals and the release of each summer’s blockbuster movies, repetitive temporal patterns impose constraints across social life” (Levine 49). Rhythm may thus be more closely connected to experientiality than the other forms since rhythm also implies a temporal dimension. In terms of narrative, rhythm usually appears in connection with a network or a broken whole, whose elements are arranged according to specific patterns. For instance, there may be regular switches between two or more narrators that are part of the same network or two separate wholes, as in *The City and the Sea*. What is just as important as rhythm is the absence of it, meaning that the individual elements of a network or separate wholes do not follow a specific pattern and therefore evoke a sense of chaos or randomness, as, for instance, in *The Blue Bedspread* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*.

This approach to narrative form makes it possible to analyse, as a first step, how various structural forms are arranged and connected to each other in non-linear and fragmented narratives, and, as a second step, how they interact with the narratives’ social arrangements. As Levine points out in the context of her reading of Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South*, “social forms bring their logics with them into the novel, working both with and against literary forms and producing unexpected political conclusions out of their encounters” (42). The more forms narratives display, the higher the chance for unexpected clashes and outcomes the reader may be confronted with and surprised by. Hence, novels with a lot of clashing forms usually force the reader to become an active participant of the narrative. This is mainly due to a persistent tension between the novels’ fragmented forms and the reader’s attempt to put the pieces together into a coherent whole. Hence, these novels’ powerful impact arises from persistent tensions between form(s), content and recipients’ expectations of what a novel should be like, including social and moral conventions.

### 3. Many Stories – Many Voices

The three novels that will be analysed in this chapter aim to constitute, and reflect upon, multiple Indian social realities, which is mainly achieved through techniques such as multiperspectivity and separate, incomplete narrative strands. Tabish Khair's *The Bus Stopped*, Neel Mukherjee's *A State of Freedom*, and Altaf Tyrewala's *No God in Sight* are all concerned with the divisions that run through Indian society, giving a voice to characters from various parts of the social spectrum. *The Bus Stopped* particularly demonstrates that the process of perception in general is not seamless and that the perspectives of various characters cannot be assembled into a coherent whole, thus exposing conventional storytelling techniques as inadequate for the reflection upon multiple (Indian) social realities. As Anna Clarke describes the overall set-up of Khair's novel, "[t]he events are episodic, connections between characters arbitrary and contingent, as several stories and perspectives are orchestrated by the multitude of first and third-person narrators, some omnipresent, like the narrator of the closing section of the novel, others specifically limited to the perspective of one character, like that of Shankar, the ticket collector" (60). *A State of Freedom* employs similar narrative strategies to reveal the plight of characters positioned at the very bottom of the social scale, demonstrating that it is impossible for them to cross the boundaries of their assigned social territories. Reviewer Gaiutra Bahadur therefore notes that "*A State of Freedom* clearly has [a] moral purpose: to critically examine postcolonial India's promised tryst with freedom" (n.p.). As Debal K. SinghaRoy adds in this respect, "[...] a vast section of the Indian society has only been partly integrated with the nation-building process, for one reason or the other, as economic stagnation and downward mobility, political segregation and disempowerment, and cultural isolation and social inequalities has remained part of their everyday lived-in experience" (3). *No God in Sight* takes a slightly more balanced approach to the examination of Indian social divisions than *A State of Freedom*, providing an extensive overview of characters belonging to various different social and religious groups in the city of Mumbai at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The following analysis will draw upon the forms Levine identifies in her study, namely whole, rhythm, hierarchy and network, as they are effective tools to explain how the novels' formal arrangements construct, and reflect upon, various realities of a deeply fragmented society that can hardly be considered a whole. For the purpose of showing that the three novels of this chapter offer similar but not exactly the same approaches to a reflection upon Indian social realities, it will be necessary to pay particular attention to how the social arrangements interact with the forms that can be identified on the structural level. The formal strategies

employed in the novels place particular emphasis on the social boundaries that exist between the characters and establish only loose connections between the novels' short chapters and vignettes. The identification of these various forms and an analysis of what effects are created when they meet or clash will make it possible to explain how the chosen techniques provide the reader with various constructed realities, which novels with more conventional storytelling techniques would not afford to the same extent.

### **3.1 Limited but (Not) Equal: Tabish Khair's *The Bus Stopped***

Born in 1966, Tabish Khair grew up in a Muslim middle-class family in Bihar and is currently a Professor in the English Department at Aarhus University in Denmark. He published three poetry collections in the 1990s before focusing increasingly on prose fiction (cf. Gámez-Fernández, Dwivedi ix-x). *The Bus Stopped*, published in 2004, is his second of seven inventive novels so far, presenting particularly the lives of individuals belonging to marginalised religious and social groups in contemporary India. As Cristina M. Gámez-Fernández and Om Prakash Dwivedi point out in the introduction to the study *Tabish Khair: Critical Perspectives*, “[i]ndeed he [Khair] has often spoken of his understanding of ‘minorities’ as a shaping element in his life and work. [...] His particular consideration of issues such as Indian writing both in India and abroad, religious intolerance, social injustice and rich Indian cultural heritage is skillfully combined with his subtle, lyrical, harsh and hilarious writing” (xi). However, as Gámez-Fernández and Dwivedi further argue, “[d]espite all these literary merits that Khair possesses, his visibility and recognition as a writer is yet to be acknowledged in academia. [...] The global literary market is located in the West; therefore writers need to pander to the tastes of global publishing agents and markets. And this is exactly the kind of practice which Khair has always refused to accept, or even legitimize” (xvi-xvii). In addition to his works of fiction, which have been translated into several languages, Khair has also published a number of academic studies, among them *Babu Fictions: Alienation in Contemporary Indian English Novels* (2001) and *The New Xenophobia* (2016).

#### ***The Bus Stopped: An Overview of Content and Form***

Khair's novel tells the stories of several characters who board a private bus from Gaya to Phansa in the Indian state of Bihar and witness a tragic incident during their journey. The novel is divided into three sections called *Homes*, *Journeys*, and *Homes, Again*. The first and last parts

frame the large middle section, which is in turn divided into 69 short chapters that are devoted to the portrayal of the life stories of several different characters that board the bus or are in some way connected to it. The episodes of this middle section must be understood as elements of a horizontal and loosely connected network in which several narrators appear to provide snippets of the characters' stories. As Marino observes with regard to the novel's structure, "[...] Khair has apparently opted for a unique and thought-provoking strategy of representation that compels his readers, as well as literary critics, to fully appreciate the various threads that compose the rich and complex texture of the Indian society" (67). The first part introduces a first-person narrator who indulges in memories of the two houses he grew up in, thus establishing a narrative hierarchy that is later broken down. In the course of the middle section, this first-person narrator also tells the stories of some of the servants that used to work for his family, including Wazir Mian, their cook, and Zeenat, a young woman he had a crush on during his youth. However, the first character to appear in the horizontally arranged network of the middle section is Mangal Singh, the driver of the bus, whose memories of the past are disclosed in every other chapter, creating a regular rhythm within the network. The other passengers on the bus whose stories become part of the network include a hijra character, a tribal woman with her dead baby, a ticket conductor called Shankar, Rasmus, a businessman from Denmark with Indian roots who is forced to board the bus after his car's breakdown, and Mrs Mirchandani, an elderly lady who hopes to find a wife for her son, Vijay. We also learn about the inhabitants of a building in the city of Patna, including Mr and Mrs Sharma, and Mrs Prasad and her servant Chottu, who runs away from home. The last section of the novel, which seems to re-establish the narrative hierarchy of the narrator from the first section of the novel, offers a summary of what might happen to the characters after the bus's arrival. As Gillian Dooley therefore points out, "*The Bus Stopped* shows us the complex relationships, the many threads making up each individual life, and the way they can intersect at one moment only to diverge and follow totally separate paths thereafter. The variety of points of view provides different perceptions of the other characters but the novel as a whole is like a combination of several novels [...]" (99).

### **"Homes": Establishing a Narrative Hierarchy**

This last and the first section of the novel are presented by a first-person narrator with an upper-class background who introduces the reader to the social hierarchies prevalent in Indian society and also establishes a narrative hierarchy. As King observes in this context, "[s]ignificantly the 69 scenes of life on or viewed from the bus are introduced and concluded by the author writing

his memories of two homes and how they have changed with each generation” (“To Be or Not to Be Diasporic” 140). This first-person narrator, who is presumably close to the empirical author, starts the novel with the following memory of his childhood home: “More than the sahabas, bibis and babus, it was the servants who knew the lay of the two houses I grew up in, their scratched geography, their shadowed histories, their many voices of noon and curtailment, evening and smokeliness. Because, more than the masters, it was the servants who had been midwives to the birth of the two houses that cradled our lives” (*The Bus Stopped* 3). In addition to providing an overview of the homes of the narrator’s childhood, the first section places emphasis on the hierarchical relationship of the narrator’s family and their servants. In fact, this first section of the novel displays hierarchical arrangements in terms of content and form. The first-person narrator is positioned at the upper end of the social hierarchy and in control of the story he is telling. However, it is soon noticeable that these hierarchies and structures are not as rigid as they first seem to be, even though the narrator feels a strong attachment to the past and keeps indulging in memories of his childhood: “I walk through one of the houses – the white one – with careful, muffled steps. The dust of my history lies heavily on this house. I do not wish to disturb these visible layers of accreted time. This is the house I will always know as Ammi ké yahan. At Ammi’s place. Ammi’s house” (*The Bus Stopped* 3). The switch to present tense creates a greater sense of immediacy, emphasising how emotionally attached the narrator is to his former home. However, as Marino notes in her essay on the novel, “[n]otwithstanding the obvious attachment the anonymous frame narrator feels towards it, the house portrayed at the beginning of the volume is involved in an interesting process of reshaping, of inevitable transformation” (69). The vividness of the narrator’s memories is underlined when he shortly afterwards recalls another scene from his childhood in present tense:

I skate across the other house’s newly polished mosaic tile floor at the age of five or six. My shiny black school shoes slither and skid, and I imagine I am wearing roller skates. [...] This house I still approach with something like a shout once a year. But the house no longer shouts back. Like an aged retainer, it smiles and grunts in reply. [...] This house is simply house. Home. Ghar. There are times when I feel that this is the only home I have ever known, will ever know. No matter where I go, no matter how many years I stay away, this will be home. (*The Bus Stopped* 4)

The frame section reflects the narrator’s attachment to the past, and he further notes that he will always consider this place his home despite inevitable changes over the years. The passage implies that change is inevitable, potentially also in terms of hierarchical social structures. Reviewer Siddhartha Deb even notes that change is, in fact, omnipresent in the novel, also during the course of the middle section:

Neither modernism nor modernity [...] are unknown entities in the realm of the Phansa-Gaya bus. In spite of the careful attention to realism of detail and character, and notwithstanding the lyrical beauty of many of the passages, Khair wants us to know that his novel does not depict an unchanging, self-contained world. The central denouement promised by the title may mislead the naive reader or lazy reviewer into seeing this book as an exotic portrait of a timeless rural India, but Khair shows us in many different ways how the provincial has already registered the presence of the metropolitan, modern world. (n.p.)

In addition to the allusion to inevitable changes, the frame section underlines the importance of having a home, a safe shelter to return to whenever one wishes to do so. After elaborating on the exact locations of the houses and on the circumstances under which they were built, the narrator focuses on the living conditions of his family's servants for a considerable amount of time: "The white house had its particular relationship with servants. They lived in servants' quarters, an enclosed space constructed around a large courtyard and attached to the kitchen and the storeroom" (*The Bus Stopped* 6). Vivek Bharti additionally argues with regard to the frame section that

[t]he present cannot bear the burden of the past but undoubtedly, it cannot sever completely its association with the past. The novel begins with a reminder of grandeur of Indian past and shows how the well-to-do families led a royal life and maintained Indian tradition of giving due respect to the guests and helping the poor and needy ones. A large number of retainers are dependent on such families for their livelihood and these servants follow a particular decorum vis-à-vis their lords. (128)

Additionally, as the first section is restricted to the narrator's perspective, the perspective of an upper-class character, it initially conveys the impression that he will be in control of the narrative that unfolds on the following pages and thus keep up his authority. Nevertheless, as King adds in this respect, "[h]e seems especially conscious of servants and of not knowing their inner lives and 'homes' [...]" (*Rewriting India* 165). After explaining the relationship between the servants and his family in more detail, he continues to describe the other house:

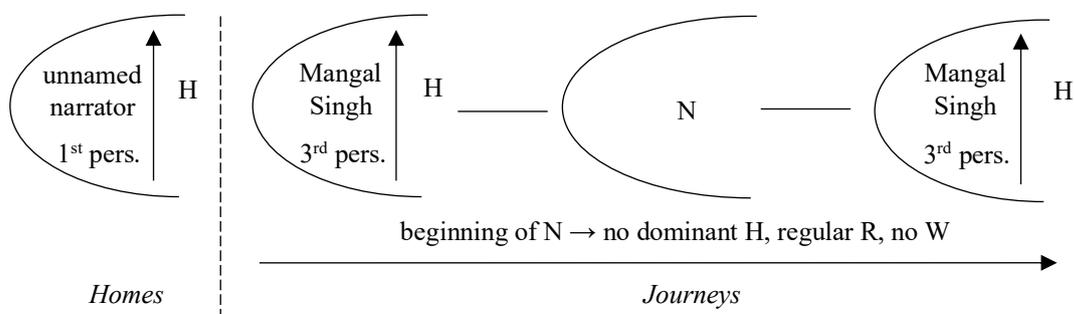
My father's house, ghar to us, was just as massive a structure, built in the north end of the compound. [...] Ghar had only a three-room servants' quarters at the back. And even these were seldom used, most of the newer servants preferring to sleep in the verandas or one of the guestrooms. [...] But what about the servants themselves, you may ask. Didn't they have houses of their own? Some did and many didn't. Some spent the years in Ammi's house or our house saving up to build a house and buy (or buy back) land in some distant village, to which they ultimately returned. (*The Bus Stopped* 6-7)

Even though the relationship between the narrator's family and their servants seems to have been familial and not oppressive, the difference in caste and class is obvious and also reflected by the location of their houses: "But such was the distance between their houses and ours and

so fleeting the occasions, such as a marriage, when we entered their houses that to tell of the houses of our servants would be impossible for me. We saw their houses only once or twice, if ever. They were in places where the bus stopped only for a minute, or not at all” (*The Bus Stopped* 7). The narrator has not often visited their servants’ homes, and the places are clearly far off and insignificant as the bus only stops there for a minute or not at all. The frame section thus places emphasis on Indian society’s hierarchical structure, which is particularly reflected in spatial terms. This hierarchical or vertical arrangement is complemented with a hierarchical set-up in terms of narrative form, with the first-person narrator belonging to the upper end of the social scale and being in control of the narrative. Additionally, the fact that the servants are mostly denied access to the bus, which symbolically implies a horizontal movement from one place to another, underlines their position at the lower end of the social scale with limited possibilities.

**“Journeys”: A Network of Stories and Memories**

The following section, *Journeys*, breaks down the hierarchical arrangement in terms of narrative perspective that the first one has established, introduces a loosely connected network of unfinished stories, and additionally draws attention to the way human perception works, particularly in the text passages about Mangal Singh, the bus driver. The first element of this network switches to a new scene starting in medias res: “When he steps into the clearing it is not yet fully light. He walks to one of the buses parked in the clearing, an area which looks a bit like an abandoned field and a half-hearted attempt at starting a garage; he walks slowly, listlessly” (*The Bus Stopped* 11). The network is thus introduced by a new, heterodiegetic narrator with internal focalisation through Mangal Singh.



The fact that the episodes focusing on Singh are presented by a heterodiegetic narrator demonstrates that (even though they are told with internal focalisation) Singh is, in contrast to

the character from the frame section, not granted the power to tell his story himself but is controlled by a narrator who is positioned above him in the hierarchy. The structural break or clash of forms between the first and the second part is likely to trigger surprise or confusion in the reader, who might initially wonder whether the narrator of the frame story also introduces this new section. Like the narrator of the first part, the bus driver indulges in memories of the past and is eager to collect images during each bus journey. Additionally, he has the ability to notice small and seemingly unimportant details in particular: “There are dewdrops on the windowpanes of the bus. Once in a while a drop quivers, hesitates and starts rolling down. Of its own volition or encouraged by the slight chilly breeze, it rolls, slowly at first, and then faster as it collects more drops, until it appears to be a narrow stream hurtling down, down, down, until it drops to the dirty earth” (*The Bus Stopped* 12). The driver is aware of these talents, as the narrator notes in a passage of internal focalisation:

He is a man who notices such things, he is a man who only notices such things; it seems to him, if he had noticed other things he would have been another man and not a bus driver plying one of the buses of his second cousin’s husband. He sees life in still small images, almost frozen, and does not really know what image – momentous or incidental – would etch a particular moment or day or trip into his memory. Some people collect stamps or bottles or coins; he collects images, you have to collect something as worthless as images, don’t you, no market value to them, and he has to collect them, nothing but them, images! images!, one from each trip of his life, thousands of them now, all meticulously remembered, just those single images, a colour, a scene, a face, an act italicized on the pages of memory. Not that he chooses the images consciously; that is simply the way his mind orders the seamless and yet unravelling days of his life. (*The Bus Stopped* 12)

The subjective images the bus driver collects during his journeys are presented in every other chapter of the large middle section of the novel, thus creating a regular rhythm within the network. As Joel Kuortti remarks in this respect, “[t]he main constructing element [of the novel] is the third-person narrative of the driver, Mangal Singh, whose point of view is in every second – albeit often very brief – chapter (30 in all, of which 3 are in zero person), sometimes as short as only two lines (Chapters 53 & 55). This pattern is broken only in the last 10 chapters when Mangal Singh does not appear anymore” (49). Like the narrator of the frame section, the new narrator provides the reader with detailed descriptions of specific sceneries and of memories Mangal Singh indulges in. This act of noticing small details in particular serves as a reflection upon the way humans perceive their environment. It is never possible to take in the whole scene one encounters; instead, it is natural to focus on specific details that stand out in particular, even though humans tend to keep up the illusion that it is possible for them to notice everything happening in their surroundings. Caracciolo supports this assumption, pointing out in his study

on the enactivist approach that “[...] we do not always see everything that is in our visual field” (97) and explaining that,

[i]n *Action in Perception* (2004), Alva Noë uses inattentional blindness (and other, similar phenomena) to dispel the illusion that the perceived world is like a gap-free and highly detailed photograph (he calls it the ‘snapshot conception’ of perception). [...] Where, then, does the sense that the perceived world is gap-free come from? Traditionally, computational theories of perception (such as the one advanced by David Marr in *Vision* [1982]) insisted that we make up for the short-comings of our retinal image by constructing an internal model of the world. By contrast, the enactivists hold that there is no need to posit the existence of these ‘mental representations’ as far as perception is concerned. We perceive the world as gap-free because we move our body, head, and eyes; subjectively, there are no gaps because, in whatever direction we look, the world is there. (97-98)

No matter to what extent one may agree with the enactivist or older approaches to perception, Caracciolo’s argument raises awareness of the fact that there is scientific proof to counter the notion of a gap-free perception of the world around us. Extending this case of our vision to the broader question of how humans interpret their surroundings and make sense of the world in general, it becomes clear that it involves subjective and selective processes that are different for each individual. In terms of the structure of the novel, reviewer Ravi Shankar Etteth additionally notes that “the chapters are short, some very short: barely half a page or a mere four lines. The device is interesting, it gives the reader a very visual and tactile sense of journey, a very Indian journey, as the bus rambles through Bihar roads, rumbling and lurching into sudden stops” (n.p.). Hence, what the novel does is lay bare to the reader the selective dimension involved in the process of perception. Further, the case of the bus driver, who collects memories during his journeys through rural India, symbolises in particular how “[l]ife is fast moving upward but still bittersweet memories of the past create a connectivity between the past, the present and the future” (Bharti 129). Kristin Hicks explains the connection of Singh’s memories of the past and the new images he collects in the present in more detail:

Large parts of his days seem devoted to reminiscing about his desires, desires which we soon discover are unobtainable, because their objects exist in the past. His true wishes once were to become a successful fiction writer, and to marry his cousin, Sunita. Unable to fulfil these desires, he clings to the memory of a time when these were still opportunities. Memory is thus soothing the realities of his current situation, and it becomes a project for Singh not to fill the pages of his memory, but to re-read them. The new impressions he takes in during his trips are however not attempts to forget the past; they are rather reinforcing the already existing memories. (36)

This interplay of memories of the past and new impressions is, for instance, depicted in the seventh chapter of the novel; when the bus is passing the Kund, some of the passengers throw coins out of the windows, which the narrator describes as follows:

The green water of the Kund beyond the Karbala-Kund turning. Two pilgrims, upper bodies bare, dipping their tonsured heads into it. Two of the older passengers lean out and toss 25-paisa coins at the Kund, fools, why don't they give it to him if they are loaded with the stuff, fucking old cunts. The coins do not carry so far. They fall by the roadside and in his side-view mirror he can see a group of children scrambling for them in the dust. They grow smaller and smaller, a blur of brown limbs, a commotion in the past. (*The Bus Stopped* 29)

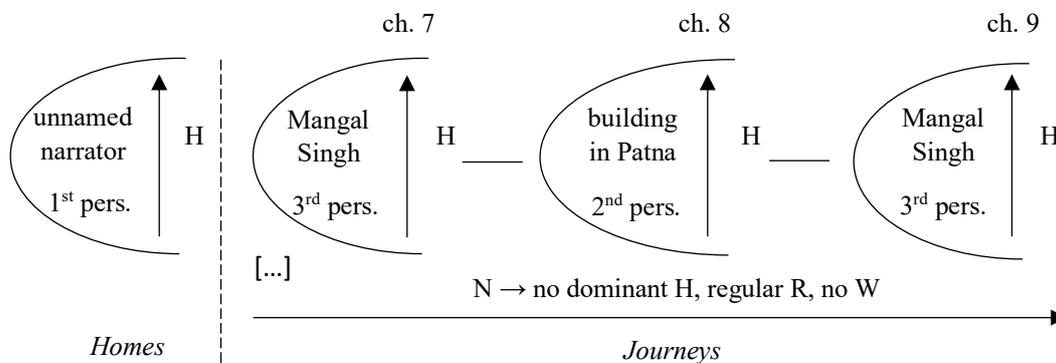
The next thing he perceives is “[a] flock of doves [that] lifts heavily from the road to make way for the bus. He sees them settling back again, waddling on the road, erasing his passage” (*The Bus Stopped* 29). This scene suddenly triggers a memory of Sunita, his cousin and the woman he secretly has a crush on:

For a second, the image of Sunita comes to his mind: Sunita young, when her eyes had smiled at him and her lips had smiled at the world. Such a large flock of happiness had lifted from her face and eyes after marriage – or was it before marriage, when she decided, for she could have said no – such a large flock that never settled back. Never. (*The Bus Stopped* 29)

The image of Sunita that suddenly comes to his mind is triggered by the flock of doves he had noticed beforehand. It is the same strategy as in the opening section when the first-person narrator remembers entering one of his two homes during his childhood; the novel repeatedly switches between the characters' memories of the past and the scenes they perceive in the present moment, imitating how the mind may process new information and connect it to old memories in a non-linear fashion. Additionally, the thoughts and memories that keep coming to Singh's mind are usually interrupted by the beginning of another element of the network. For instance, after his memory about Sunita and the observation that the large flock of happiness never settled, the narrator of the next element of the network suddenly introduces “a town that knows apartments, though it has not become used to them. This is not Delhi or Bombay, with their apartment houses and multi-storeyed flats, their insulated cardboard boxes of privacy. [...] This is Patna: a city that is not quite a city, a town that is more than a town” (*The Bus Stopped* 30). These sudden switches raise awareness of the fact that the perspective of each individual is limited and that it is, in reality, impossible for one narrator to know and to see everything, thus also indicating the limits of more conventional storytelling techniques. As Marino notes in her essay on the novel, “[a] closer analysis [...] immediately reveals the absence of a definite, conventional plot developing throughout the volume, and the presence of a multiplicity of alternating storytellers, at least nine, each employing a distinctive linguistic register and a different type of narrator (first person, third person, impersonal). Needless to say, none of them is omniscient” (68).

### A Reflection on the Limits of Perception and Storytelling

The reader is asked to actively reflect on the limits of perception and conventional storytelling during the elements of the network surrounding the inhabitants of the building in Patna, written in the second person. As Hicks describes the connection between the bus and the building that is suddenly introduced, “we peep in the windows of houses along the journeys described in this novel. The house is remembered like a being with personality and moods, and a life of its own” (59). This house in which Mr and Mrs Sharma, and Mrs Prasad and her servant Chottu live first comes up in the eighth chapter, and the observer’s situation the reader is supposed to identify with is described as follows: “Here the walls are membranes through whose tight secrecy permeates much that may only be heard, not seen. It is this that sometimes makes you believe that you have heard all that needs to be heard. That is why you sit in your flat on the third floor in Kanchenjunga Apartments, the TV on but its sound switched off” (*The Bus Stopped* 30-31). The narrator further notes that “what you hear you do not need to see. You don’t need to see the man walking up the stairway” (*The Bus Stopped* 31). Readers are put into the role of observers who are only listening to what is going on in their close environment and hence made to feel as if they are part of the novel’s network of stories.



In this context, Adalinda Gasparini comments on what it means to ‘have heard it all’:

When writing in the second person Khair speaks to every reader, particularly those who believe that they *have heard all that needs to be heard*, readers who engage with Others by listening, being sincerely interested in other’s [sic] lives. To believe that one *has heard all* means to build a map of reality that isolates life’s tragic dimension, so that one may rest in her/his armchair or fall asleep every night, reassured by the regular repetition of familiar voices and noises. (“Bhoolbhoolaiya” 57, emphasis in the original)

Gasparini implies that the observer is caught in a monotonous routine that makes them believe that they must have heard it all. However, as Gasparini further argues, “[w]hen the old wealthy Mrs Prasad is murdered by thieves introduced by her young servant Chottu, the listener in Patna

is forced to accept that she/he has not heard it all” (“Bhoolbhoolaiya” 57). She indicates that it may take tragic incidents to break the monotony of everyday life and that there are always events that are not predictable: “Regardless of how carefully she/he listens, despite how completely she/he observes all that goes on, just at the point when she/he thinks to *have heard it all*, the tragic dimension strikes and ravages the harvest of certainties so carefully cultivated” (Gasparini, “Bhoolbhoolaiya” 58, emphasis in the original). Her observations do not only apply to the elements of the network in which the reader is addressed and made part of the narrative; in fact, they apply to the project or strategy of the novel as a whole. Once more, the aim is to indicate that human perception is limited and that it is never possible to see or predict everything, no matter how closely one pays attention to one’s surroundings. The structure of the novel thus turns the reader into an active participant of the narrative as it pretends that it is necessary to pay attention to every single detail in order to be able to see the connections between the network’s various elements. However, as it turns out, the stories of the network are only loosely connected and cannot be assembled into a whole, no matter how much attention one pays to the details. If this were possible, readers would continue being under the illusion that they are always able to hear and to see it all. Instead, the second-person narrative in particular successfully conveys the impression to readers that they themselves are part of the network and only have a limited perspective. Gasparini further notes that, “[i]nstead of easily seducing the reader, writing here implies rigorous and vigorous reflection – both poetic and ethical – on our identity and our otherness. The other is not abstract, but rather our neighbor, and they surprise us with an invitation we cannot refuse to move beyond our borders” (“Exceptionally Sensitive” 74). The structural arrangement of the novel therefore also has the aim to demonstrate to readers that their perspectives of others are always limited and that it might be necessary to move beyond their assigned social territories in order to eradicate the existing gulfs between them and the people with different backgrounds. Hence, *The Bus Stopped* should also be understood as an invitation to reflect on otherness and to move beyond one’s assigned social territory.

### **Expanding the Network, Breaking down Hierarchies**

As the network expands, the reader is also repeatedly confronted with the issue of otherness since it presents snippets of the life stories of many different characters from various social backgrounds. As Kuortti explains, “[t]his narrative multiplicity sets the tone of the novel. Another dimension of multiplicity concerns the background of the characters: they are young

and old; men, women and *hijra*; urban and rural; educated and illiterate; they represent different religions, ethnicities, nationalities, occupations” (49-50, emphasis in the original). As these various fragments are arranged horizontally rather than vertically, they convey the impression of a breakdown of the social hierarchies existing between the passengers. Gasparini also speaks of a breakdown of hierarchies in social terms, but it should be noted that this is only seemingly the case: “Lacking in traditional hierarchy, they [the characters] all compose the novel: an erotic, grotesque, funereal, comic, tragic poem. A poem that refuses to accept the false certainties of secular or religious ideologies to respond with ethical and economic resolve to the finger pointed by those who try to silence the outsiders” (“Bhoolbhoolaiya” 54). In fact, the social hierarchies between the characters mostly persist but are seemingly broken down by the novel’s network structure. This structure conveys the impression that, as Gasparini notes in this context, “his [Khair’s] novel does not affirm or subvert cultural, ethical, religious superiority or inferiority. Nobody and nothing is in this novel presented as inhuman, there is no scapegoat to provide relief for the reader’s conscience: not the coloniser, the terrorist, the criminal or the fundamentalist” (“Bhoolbhoolaiya” 51). The first passenger to speak is a hijra character who initially reflects on the status of hijras in contemporary Indian society, addressing the reader directly: “After all, you probably associate us with those underdressed, overly made-up, angular ‘women’ who jump at you on the streets and demand money or who barge into marriage ceremonies with loud songs and have to be paid to go away. That is what we are now: that is what has happened to us” (*The Bus Stopped* 16). At this point, the reader is only granted a limited insight into the life and attitudes of the hijra character before her account is suddenly interrupted by a chapter that focuses on Mangal Singh: “When Mangal Singh drives the bus, its yellow sides now glistening in the weak sun, into the stand behind the disused church and jumps out, only two of the five breakfast and tea stalls are open” (*The Bus Stopped* 19). The sudden switch to another character disappoints the reader’s hope to find out more about the hijra’s life and to be presented with a complete narrative whole in the sense of conventional storytelling. In the chapter that follows Singh’s, the narrator of the frame section reappears, offering an account of Wazir Mian’s life, his family’s former cook: “Bearded, massive, uncompromising, Wazir Mian made life miserable for the long line of chokkra-assistants that he just had to have, and the longer sequence of cooks who followed in his footsteps and came up inevitably short” (*The Bus Stopped* 21). The narrator of the frame section is thus integrated into the horizontally structured network that unfolds during the large middle section of the novel. The special role he had occupied in the separate and vertically structured frame section is redefined at this point; the narrator is still in control of his individual first-person narrative but his seeming superiority,

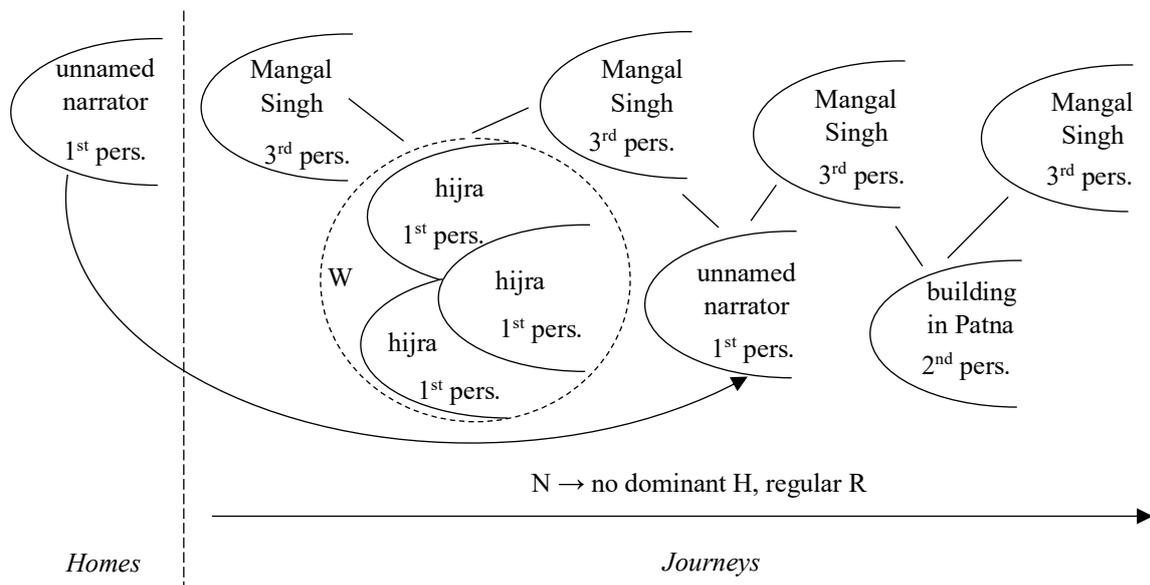
established by the frame section, is broken down as he is now just one of many characters in a horizontally arranged network. His stories about Wazir Mian and Zeenat, the young servant he used to have a crush on during his youth, do not seem to be more or less important than the stories of the other characters that appear in the network. Additionally, the social hierarchies obviously persist but the narrator does not place emphasis on them. As Kuortti notes in terms of the narrative technique of the novel and the narrator of the first section, “[...] there are several protagonists through whom the narrative unfolds, and none of them is given the final authorial authority. The framing first-person narrator – later named as Irfan – falls to the background in the novel’s 69 journey chapters that take the reader through the 69-mile stretch from Gaya to Phansa” (49). Hicks further describes the set-up of the novel with its various narrative strands as follows:

They [the characters] are all on a journey that eventually leads home, either physically or spiritually. The lives of the passengers, viewed in the specific moment of transition they share during the bus ride – are told through other specific moments of their lives. The memories evoked show us stories of lives being lived. Each life is represented through seemingly coincidental images or memories, somehow connected to the journey of the bus. The stories thus also allegorize how the present is only a preliminary stop on the continuous travel of our life, from the past through the fleeting present, into the future. (19)

The novel presents the characters on the bus as being equally important as they are all given a voice during their individual journeys from the past into the future; but even though they are all on the same bus, their stories remain largely independent elements within the network.

After seeing the first few elements of the network, the reader may still hope to be able to assemble the various fragments into one coherent whole, but it soon turns out that this is impossible. King notes in this context that “Khair’s 69 scenes are a way of writing of various lives within a community; the people are either riding on the bus or [are] somehow associated with it – such as by being observed or observing. Some stories develop over the course of the novel, others may be told in only one scene, and some characters have no story beyond making a brief appearance” (“Review Article” 136-37). Clarke adds that “[...] the form of the novel is contracted almost to the point of the novella, withholding the possibility of witnessing character development and the reader’s emotional engagement in that development, afforded by the tradition of the C 19<sup>th</sup>’s far more extensive novelistic form of a bildungsroman” (59-60). In fact, the only elements that could more or less be assembled into a whole within the network are those about the hijra character, even though they do not necessarily allow for emotional engagement either. After a few more scenes and hence several more loose strands and pieces that the reader *hopes* to assemble into a whole at some point, her story finally continues in the

sixteenth chapter: “With Chaand [another hijra she had grown up with in the gharana] gone, I realized that I would not be able to pay the rent of our house. Our old kothi, inherited by our gharana, had been sold while our ustad was still alive. We had moved to a rented house in a back alley near the red-light area. It was not a pleasant area to live in” (*The Bus Stopped* 51). The hijra reveals that she decided to leave the town altogether, in search of a place where she could live as a woman, and adds the details of how she finally ended up on the private bus to Phansa (cf. *The Bus Stopped* 52-54). It takes five more chapters and hence several more elements of the network until she continues her story: “Everyone I had ever known and cared for had gone out of my life with the departure of Chaand. I must say, I did not have a clear idea of what I would do when I reached Phansa; perhaps work as an ayah” (*The Bus Stopped* 67). On the bus, the hijra also starts talking to Mrs Mirchandani, an elderly woman who is sitting next to her. She notes that “[i]t was evident that she belonged to another social class from the rest of us [the passengers] sitting behind the partition of the driver’s seat, where three extra seats had been welded into the floor to form a square open on one side. It had been effectively turned into a section reserved for women” (*The Bus Stopped* 69). The hierarchical social structure is also reflected by the way the passengers are seated on the bus, as the hijra continues to observe: “There were other women in the bus, of course, but – like the woman with a snivelling child sitting just behind our section – they were obviously not respectable enough to be given seats away from men. There were seven of us in the section” (*The Bus Stopped* 69). The fact that the hijra is mistaken for a privileged person and given a voice as a first-person narrator within her individual elements of the network forms a counterweight to her actual position at the bottom of the social hierarchy.



The narrative situation therefore balances out the hierarchical structures she and the other passengers on the bus are actually caught in on the content level. As Gasparini notes in this context, “Khair did not construct this labyrinth to imprison someone [...]. He offers a space, of reasonable complexity, where these various characters may find hospitality and shelter enough to allow their stories the opportunity to be seen or glimpsed, guessed at or heard” (“Bhoolbhoolaiya” 61). Shortly afterwards, Mrs Mirchandani starts telling her life story to the passengers in her close environment. She reveals that she had been a refugee from Lahore who initially had to live in a refugee camp for half a year. She further reveals what a hard life she and her family had to lead for a long time until they had saved up money and could gradually work their way up the social ladder (cf. *The Bus Stopped* 70-71), implying that it is possible to break down social hierarchies, at least in some cases. The next time the hijra appears (in chapter 40), Mrs Mirchandani continues her story in direct speech, but the hijra still functions as the narrator of the chapter, even though this is not obvious until Mrs Mirchandani turns to her:

Mrs Mirchandani turned to me now and asked, But why are you travelling alone, daughter? Doesn't your husband have the sense to escort you? What is your name? I answered the last question first: my name. I gave the new name that I had assumed to shake off Iskander Mian. Once Farhana, now Parvati: it hardly mattered to me. These were all aliases that, for one reason or the other, have to obscure my identity, my real name. Then I explained that I was not married. (*The Bus Stopped* 127-28)

At this point, it finally becomes clear that the hijra still functions as the homodiegetic narrator of the chapter, granting Mrs Mirchandani the opportunity to tell her story in direct speech. The fact that the hijra therefore stays in control of the narrative structurally breaks down the hierarchy that exists between the two in social terms. When Mrs Mirchandani expresses her sympathy for the hijra and the unfavourable situation she seems to be in, the latter takes advantage of it, making up the story of being a refugee from Kashmir who is all alone in the world (cf. *The Bus Stopped* 128-29). The hijra's life afterwards takes a favourable turn as she eventually gets married to Mrs Mirchandani's son, who had never been with a woman before and therefore “did not see the difference. None of the differences” (*The Bus Stopped* 190). Thus, the hijra's story could be considered a coherent whole within the network, even though it takes time until all the pieces are assembled and the reader finds out about the happy ending. King notes the following in terms of the portrayal of the individual stories and the narrative of the hijra in particular:

The variety of telling is the point – life, unlike classical drama – does not consist of neatly structured beginnings and conclusions within fixed periods. It happens and changes. Khair has an argument; life is unpredictable and ironic, as when a castrated transvestite raised in Muslim culture finds his home has collapsed and through

pretending to be a real woman is befriended on the bus by a wealthy Hindu nationalist woman whose son he will eventually marry. (“Review Article” 137)

The hijra has clearly moved forward in life, improving her personal situation by marrying into a rich family and climbing the social ladder. However, considering the various fragmented stories that are offered as elements of the novel’s network, it is also clear that there are not many people who manage to transgress the borders of their assigned social territories, entering arenas not intended for them by Indian society. As Federica Zullo notes in this context, “[i]n fact, it seems that everyone is moving within his/her own assigned territory, but the author is able to show the conflict that immediately arises when someone steps into other people’s space and claims it” (6). The hijra is one of the few characters who successfully transgresses these boundaries and whose journey leads her to a place outside her assigned territory.

#### **A Tragic Incident and the Difficulty of Creating Wholeness**

The fact that the characters mostly move within their separate spaces and that their stories do not form a coherent whole is emphasised when the tragic incident that is supposed to connect the various passengers occurs. This incident takes place when a tribal woman with a baby in her arms boards the bus. Zullo argues that the journey of *The Bus Stopped* therefore “[...] comes to be not a normal bus route, but an experience of life and death, a difficult test for the passengers, caught in the midst of a tragedy. [...] It is a story nobody can ignore, it is the reason why the bus stops. It has to do with the incompatible systems of the nation, with subaltern stories that are not seen, nor accepted but arise suddenly to disturb the social configuration of a place” (8). Gasparini further summarises the arrangement and impact of the incident as follows:

Half-way through the novel one is presented with a story of grief that captures the reader: the story of the tribal woman, which is the only one that is not interrupted by other stories. From parts 46-61 no other tales are told, and throughout the subsequent ‘Journeys’, and the final ‘Homes’, its indelible mark remains: the author and the reader found themselves into the dark heart of their bhoorbhoolaiya. Mangal Singh remains quite silent and still while the passengers grow agitated, speak, search for an unattainable explanation for the event, a solution which will allow them to continue the journey, shed the grief, bury it hastily. (“Bhoorbhoolaiya” 61)

The incident demonstrates that even though the social hierarchy is broken down in terms of narrative technique as the novel’s horizontal network expands, it certainly persists in social terms. The event is narrated from different perspectives; a village youth, who functions as an external observer, the bus driver, the ticket conductor, and Rasmus, a businessman from

Denmark, all serve as focalisers. The first part of the story is told through the eyes of the village youth, who observes the bus while sitting on a broken wall:

He watched the preevaat bus roar into the bus stop. It belched black exhaust fumes, disgorged a few passengers and took on a few. He could recognize the bus by the conductor. [...] The conductor of this bus was a religious man with a sharp tongue that he used like a whip against those he disliked and did not fear. [...] Later, when the conductor and the driver returned to the bus, he could hear the conductor shouting at a couple of passengers who had taken advantage of the short stop to stroll away for a pee. The passengers scurried back to the bus, which started with a lurch and a series of bangs. It moved a few metres and then, to his surprise, the bus stopped. That was actually the only time he felt surprise during the entire episode. Everything else had an aura of inevitability. (*The Bus Stopped* 145)

The reader is likely to share the surprise expressed by this external observer. However, the narrator does not reveal what happens next as there is a cut after his expression of surprise and a switch to the perspective of the bus driver. This narrator does not reveal what has caused the bus to stop either and only acknowledges that Singh had failed to see something important: “But it is not that Mangal Singh sees all of them all the time. He misses things too. Like he failed to really see the tribal woman until the commotion broke out. He only saw her as money that Shankar let slip into the maalik’s coffers. He did not even see what she was carrying. He saw it and did not see it. Sometimes, seeing is not enough” (*The Bus Stopped* 146). This narrator’s reflections remain a riddle to the reader, who hopes that the next one will reveal what has happened. As Gasparini adds, “[a]s in a unicursal labyrinth, one must walk every path, follow every character, paying attention to the moment in which each of them boards the bus, to the exchange of a word or a look between passengers, to the images that make an impression on the driver punctuating the tale of all” (“Bhoolbhoolaiya” 61). In the next element of the network, the scene that has already been presented from the perspective of the village youth from outside the bus is repeated from the point of view of the ticket collector:

While we were arguing, a few passengers had come out of the bus, which was rather hot inside as it had not been moving for some time now and the breeze had dropped. Some were stretching their legs, some buying fruits from the only stall [...], some sipping tea at the two-bench dhabba next to the stall and a couple of men were urinating behind the broken back wall of the bus stop. The tribal woman who had boarded the bus at this stop had been unable to find a seat. As she was so obviously a dehaati tribal – they smell – no one had offered her a seat either. She was standing inside the front door, clutching her bundled-up child as if she was afraid of it being snatched away from her. (*The Bus Stopped* 148)

The conductor adds details on the tribal woman that the other observer had not been able to see. This technique of multiple focalisation within the network structure lays emphasis on the

subjectivity and limitations of each character's perspective, demonstrating that there is not only one way of perceiving an incident and of telling a story. The conductor is the third character to start narrating the story of the tribal woman without revealing what has actually happened to her. It gradually becomes clear that it will take several perspectives to create a more or less coherent picture of the incident, and hence an impression of wholeness within this part of the network. Additionally, this technique conveys the impression that the characters' perspectives are equally important. Rasmus clearly has a higher social status than the bus driver and the ticket conductor, and they in turn occupy a higher position on the social scale than the village youth. However, the novel's network structure conveys the impression that these hierarchies are erased as all of their perspectives are supposedly needed to create a sense of wholeness and to understand what has happened to the tribal woman. The next element of the network presents Mangal Singh's perspective again: "Behind him, beyond the pencil-like rods separating him from the passengers, people are jostling one another, spilling out of the door. The firangi is clutching his attaché case even harder. And it is only then that Mangal Singh really sees what the tribal woman has been carrying" (*The Bus Stopped* 150). The fact that not even the observations of one character are revealed within one chapter or element of the network but are interrupted by the perspectives of other characters further underlines the assumption that it is impossible to pay attention to every little detail of a scene and that the mind is not able to consciously process all the information it is confronted with every single moment. The following element of the network switches back to the village youth, with the heterodiegetic narrator continuing to present the incident from his perspective:

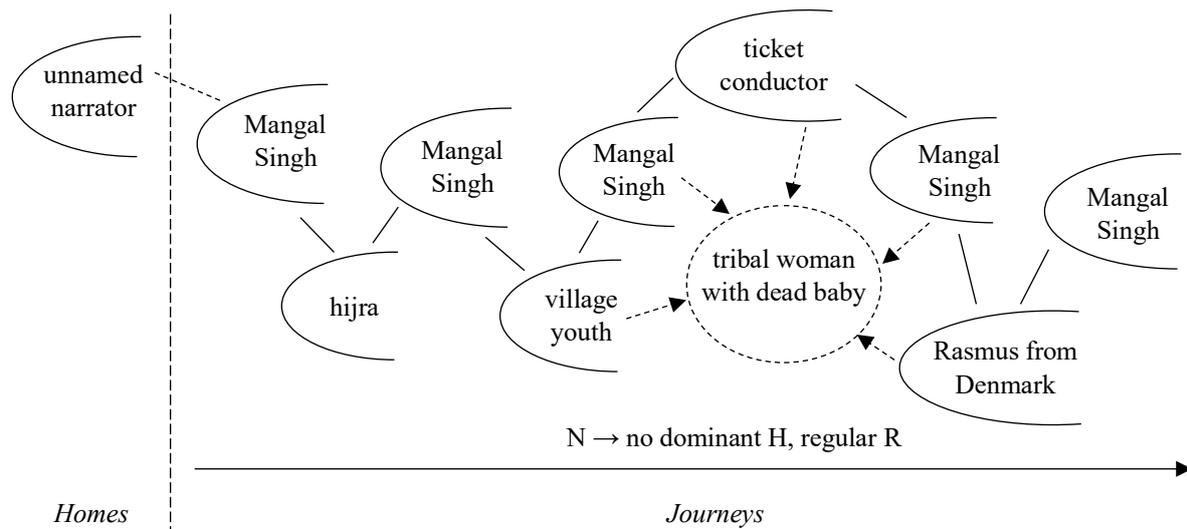
It looked like a scuffle was brewing near the driver's end. There were people crowding that end, gesticulating, shouting. He wished they would move for they were blocking his view of a pretty woman sitting next to a fat old woman dressed in an expensive white sari. However, he did not think the trouble was anything worth investigating. Probably a scuffle over a seat. The conductor of the bus jumped out of the rear door and rushed to the front one. That was probably the fastest way he could get to the spot of contention. Some passengers had also spilled out of the front exit. That was strange. He was distracted at that moment by the waddle of a teetar. It was not often that you saw a teetar this close to sites of habitation any longer. (*The Bus Stopped* 151)

The reader knows that the pretty woman the boy notices is, in fact, the hijra character, and the old woman sitting next to her Mrs Mirchandani. Further, the boy does not manage to focus on the incident taking place on the bus but is distracted by the sight of a bird that one is unlikely to see in this environment. This circumstance draws attention to the fact that different people are likely to place emphasis on different events. This may disappoint the expectations of the reader, who finally wants to learn more about the incident happening on the bus and find out

what the tribal woman, who is presented as an extreme outsider, has to do with it in particular. However, the boy gets off the topic when he all of a sudden notices the teetar. This must once more be understood as an implicit critique of conventional storytelling with a linear plotline and an omniscient narrator, which does not exist in real-life situations. Clarke also notes with regard to the structure of the novel in general that “[t]he novel illustrates at the same time as it highlights the limitations of fiction writing and storytelling, of narratives converging only to come apart” (62). Additionally, “[a]s the metaphor of weaving abounds through the text, one might be tempted to search for a controlling agency of an artisan or an artist, a weaver, who brings the stories together, but even here the certainty is withdrawn from us in this novel of storytelling or novel writing. Is Mangal Singh, the bus *driver*, literally in control of this novelistic chronotope of a bus?” (Clarke 62, emphasis in the original). Singh is clearly not in control of the narrative, and, in the following scene, the narrator explicitly comments on the arrangement of the passengers’ perspectives and the significance of the tragic incident for their individual life stories:

From the vantage point high above the crowd that had collected around the steps of the bus, from his driver’s seat, Mangal Singh could see more than most. He could see the men pushing, feeling; he could hear the suspicion and the surprise in their voices. He could feel how everyone, in his or her own way, was already trying to assimilate this thing into the longer and separate stories of their lives, the stories they had brought into the bus and would continue weaving out once they left it, yes, they had no choice but to continue those separate stories – if necessary, stepping over this thing, this unexpected thing, this alien thing that would otherwise make their separate stories redundant. (*The Bus Stopped* 153)

The narrator explicitly states that the passengers may incorporate the incident into their separate stories but that it will not connect them into a whole. However, Clarke points out that “[n]ot only the bus journey, the main structuring principle of the narrative, but in particular this central incident of the discovery of the dead child’s body, becomes a point of intersection and convergence of ‘separate stories’” (59). But even though the incident apparently connects the characters’ separate stories, the fact that the narrators report the incident from their individual perspectives makes it clear that they remain within their separate territories and keep extending the novel’s network. It is therefore more appropriate to argue that the incident becomes a part of each of the characters’ individual stories but that it does not connect them. This is mainly because the incident is not reported within one single chapter or element of the network and not told by an omniscient narrator, which would be more likely to convey the (misleading) impression of a complete story and a whole in social terms.



As Clarke adds, “[e]ven though he [Singh] sees ‘more than most’ his vantage point is still restricted and his subconscious powers of perception and his ability to tell the story limited” (62). The bus driver does not function as an omniscient narrator, and the fact that the novel deliberately avoids revealing the incident in a single chapter of the network places emphasis on the subjectivity of each of the characters’ perception and additionally demonstrates that none of the things happening around us on a daily basis are interpreted in the same way by everyone. In the Indian context in particular, it further shows how the reactions of people from different social backgrounds may differ and that the gulf between their ways of perceiving the world might even be bigger than in a society with fewer social differences. However, Zullo remarks in this context that “[b]oth Kittur [in Aravind Adiga’s *Between the Assassinations*] and the bus route Gaya-Phansa have been defined as a microcosm of contemporary India, but they are not [...] an Indian everytown or everylandscape, they are specifically Kittur or Bihar” (9). Further, “[t]his is to say that [the] writers [Khair and Adiga] have melted a sense of specific locatedness with the coordinates of a more official, enlarged national framework, but what emerges remarkably is the sentiment of a unique place and its people” (Zullo 9). Even though it is true that the characters on the bus may present the sentiment of a specific rural place and not the whole of India, the important point is that they still have different social backgrounds and different perspectives. In fact, the very circumstance that a rural place in particular already displays so much diversity hints at how fragmented Indian society as a whole must be. Therefore, it is certainly not wrong to argue that “[h]is [Khair’s] focus on differences within India can be seen in the idea and structure of *The Bus Stopped* (2004), a multivocal community novel” (King, “To Be or Not to Be” 140). Hence, as Bharti puts it, “*The Bus Stopped* creates a microcosmic picture which is representative of broad contours of Indian life. No doubt, the

picture as portrayed in the novel is of rural and semi urban India but it approaches the quintessence of India” (125). As the novel provides an insight into the minds of various characters with different social backgrounds, it becomes easier for the reader to understand how prejudices may potentially arise and how the social gulf between different groups of people is maintained. Marino puts it as follows:

The peculiar structure of the novel seems to encourage readers to contemplate reality from a variety of perspectives, thus undermining the rigidity of stereotypical perceptions and their exclusiveness. The same incident (for example, the discovery that a tribal woman is carrying her dead child on the bus) can be observed through many eyes, from different angles, stirring dissimilar, even opposite reactions: horror, shock, indifference, curiosity, irritation or compassion. Each character’s view is at the same time central and peripheral: no partiality on the part of Tabish Khair can ever be detected. (69)

Over time, Mangal Singh’s observations become shorter and shorter: “Mangal Singh could see the tribal woman put down the bundle as if she had nothing to do with it” (*The Bus Stopped* 155). The reader might be surprised by this condensed observation and continue wondering what has actually caused the woman to put down the bundle. The following element of the network, which switches back to the perspective of the ticket conductor, finally reveals the secret:

Finally, all of them were aboard. I banged thrice on the side to signal to Mangal babu to start driving, but for once he did not need to be prompted: the bus was already crawling out of the stop. Just then there was a commotion near the front door. I could make out a man’s voice over the general uproar. He was saying – The child is dead. I am telling you, the child is dead! Touch his arms, they are cold, thanda like ice. More voices pitched in, expressing surprise, indignation, shock, scepticism, anger, plain curiosity. The bus started slowing down. (*The Bus Stopped* 157)

Afterwards, the conductor repeats the scene that has already been revealed in the network’s previous short chapter on Singh: “Finally, she stopped saying ‘not dead’. But she did not weep or go away. She placed the child on the ground before her feet, as if the child no longer belonged to her, and remained sitting on the steps” (*The Bus Stopped* 159). The next moment, Singh also fully realises why she has put down the bundle: “And then Mangal Singh saw it, the image that would stay in his mind, that would fill up so much space in his imagination that the rest of the trip would be washed away from his memory. His mind, greedy author, italicized it on the pages of his memory even though he, for one, could never tell that story. Not really. Not fully” (*The Bus Stopped* 160). Singh knows immediately that the sight of the dead baby on the floor is the only image that will come to his mind when he remembers this journey from Gaya to Phansa in the future. In the following element of the network, Rasmus’s perspective is presented. He does not notice immediately what is going on but “suddenly there was only one reality of

conversation on the bus. Death. But it was not at all the kind of death Rasmus could recognize. It did not have the ordered decorum, the regulated heaviness, the dutiful attendance of the deaths he had witnessed or heard of in Denmark” (*The Bus Stopped* 161). Most of the reactions come across as unemotional, particularly the last ones by Singh, who is finally silenced by the incident: “What Mangal Singh would remember most vividly about this trip were the two flies probing the concavities of the child’s nostrils, impervious to the seething of life around them, impervious to the silence of death that sat like a blush on the child’s face” (*The Bus Stopped* 163). In the last of the network’s elements in which Singh appears, his name is not even mentioned anymore: “Finally, it was simple: *Two flies probing the concavities of a dead child’s nostrils*” (*The Bus Stopped* 165, emphasis in the original). This is likely to be the exact image that will stick to Singh’s mind forever and come up whenever he remembers this particular bus journey. In the following element of the network, the conductor addresses the tribal woman directly: “Take the body back to your village, I told the tribal woman, who was slowly, wordlessly rocking on her haunches now. Take him home; the elders will know what to do” (*The Bus Stopped* 166). When the woman tells him that this is impossible, they decide to bury the dead child right away. During the procedure, the woman does not move at all, and afterwards the conductor tells her the following: “We have done it, I said, wanting the tribal woman to move and let us continue with the journey. We were already late by two hours or more. There is no need for you to go to Phansa now [...]” (*The Bus Stopped* 169). It is surprising that the perspective of the tribal woman is omitted and that she is the only one who stays silent, even though she is the focus of attention. In fact, it conveys the impression that the structural hierarchy is re-established to a certain degree as the one character who is situated at the very bottom of the social scale is not given a voice within the network. Marino argues that “Khair portrays a kaleidoscopic, dynamic reality in constant evolution, and outlines his characters’ identity as *porous* or *fluid*, so that none of the protagonists can ever be rigidly classified, or singled out as *the other* – at least not permanently [...]” (67, emphasis in the original). However, the tribal woman is situated at the very bottom of the social hierarchy and not given a voice during the entire incident. Gasparini adds the following observation in terms of the novel’s treatment and perception of otherness:

The complexity of Tabish Khair’s reflections on otherness has a concrete dimension that becomes clear if we think about a common everyday experience. If we, with our full citizen’s rights as our birthright, meet an immigrant and look at them and let them look at us, then we feel a closeness that soon becomes intimate, to the point that we have to stop looking. We are able to discover that we are both the explorer and the explored. (“Exceptionally Sensitive” 77)

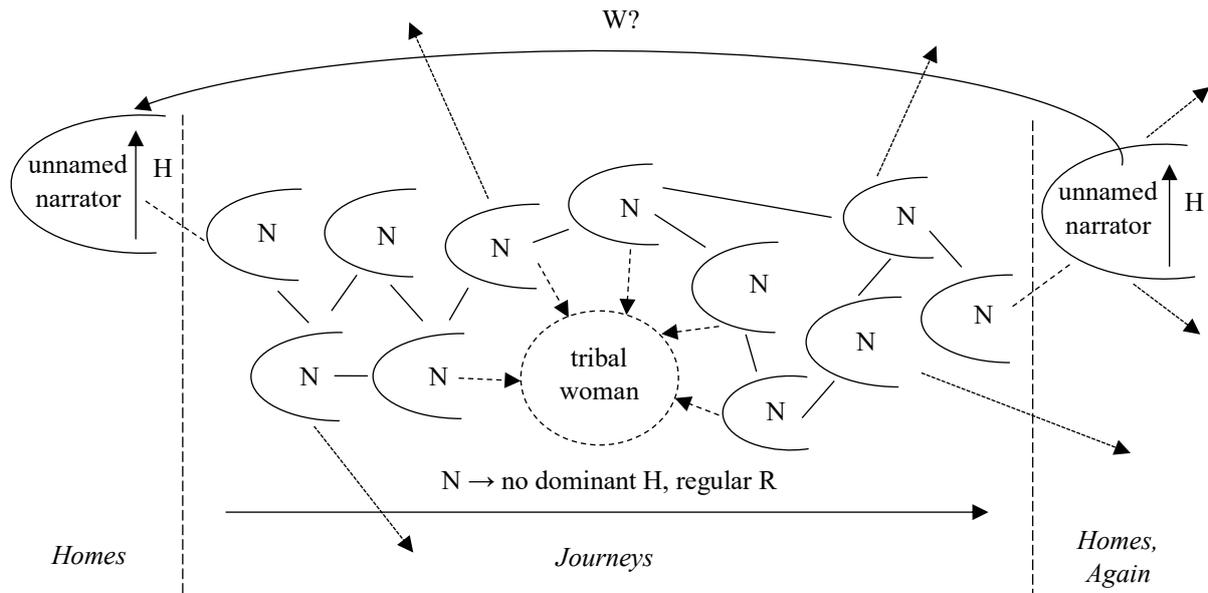
The novel's network structure conveys this sense of exploring and being explored at the same time; however, the tribal woman is the only character who never functions as an explorer. As Dooley also points out in this respect, "[e]ach character reveals something of themselves in their reaction to this event, whether they lecture the woman, insist on burying the child, or try to comfort her. We do not learn any of the tribal woman's 'back story': we see her only as the other passengers see her, so it is in a way rather odd that she should be at the centre of the climactic event of the novel" (97). This circumstance draws special attention to the fact that the social hierarchy, which the horizontally structured network of the novel has seemingly erased, is in reality as present as ever. Additionally, after an argument about whether the tribal woman's ticket should be refunded after the incident, the bus simply continues its journey. The narrator continues Rasmus's story as if the incident had never taken place, talking about the most prominent differences between India and Denmark (cf. *The Bus Stopped* 172-73), his meeting with the minister, and his arrival at the guesthouse (cf. *The Bus Stopped* 176-77). The village youth returns home in the evening (cf. *The Bus Stopped* 178-79), and the hijra continues her story about getting married to Mrs Mirchandani's son (cf. *The Bus Stopped* 180-83). The incident of the dead baby is apparently quickly forgotten and has not created a sense of wholeness, neither in terms of content nor in terms of structure. After burying the baby, the narrators continue telling their individual stories without interacting with each other or spending any thought on the tragedy.

### ***"Homes, Again": Re-establishing a Narrative Hierarchy?***

The third and final section of the novel, *Homes, Again*, is told by an omniscient narrator, who summarises what happens to the passengers after their arrival. Finally, the various elements of the novel's large network are concluded by a narrator who is in control of the final part of the novel and therefore seemingly able to create a sense of wholeness. It is likely to be the narrator from the first section as he mentions his childhood home again. The hierarchies that are mostly broken down as the network expands, at least in terms of narrative perspective, are therefore re-established. However, the omniscient narrator does not add any proper endings to the separate stories, even though the reader might expect him to do so. He is only able to reveal how some of the stories have continued and considers himself as one of the passengers. Hence, even though he is an omniscient narrator at first sight, he intends to remain part of the horizontal network established during the novel's middle section:

We have all returned home, or at least to houses. I have the home of many memories, that house of, shall we say, sixty-nine rooms. It is through the windows of those helter-skelter rooms that I first saw the world I have tried to show you, those rooms that are all jumbled up – as if in a bhoolbhoolaiya, as if in a house added to and demolished over the years, as if in one of those mental states (like dreaming or remembering or meditating) when there is a seamlessness in the way things flow backwards and forwards. My homes – fragile, confusing, monstrous – have not been contained by Ammi ké yahan and Ghar, even though I have always borne their burden. Parvati, Farhana, whatever her name is, has found a home too; she has found a respectable home, the house of the Mirchandanis [...]. (*The Bus Stopped* 195-96)

The narrator continues to outline what has happened or might happen to the other characters as well. As Clarke argues in this context, “[t]he entire last section, presented in the deceptively reassuring voice of the omniscient narrator has a mobile, cinematic quality of moving pictures to it. Vignettes of the individual characters, at the place of their respective destinations at the point of ending of the narrative journey, come in quick succession in a cinematic-type montage” (61). However, there are still many unanswered questions: “What about the tribal woman, you might ask. Did she get home? Did she have a home? What about Chottu? [...] And what about the child who was buried by the roadside? Did he find his home there, under earth and rubble?” (*The Bus Stopped* 197). The narrator is therefore not omniscient in the conventional sense, which may be interpreted as implicit criticism of conventional storytelling that features a narrator who is finally able to put the separate pieces together and to provide answers to all the open questions. Afterwards, the narrator starts reflecting on the notion of home in general but once more does not offer any answers: “And you may ask, where do homes begin? Do they begin out in the street, where the brick starts leading to the gate? Do they begin at the gate? Are they the village, the town, the city? [...] Or can a bus be home?” (*The Bus Stopped* 198). Hence, “[t]he arrival [...] only turns out to be another point of departure as the closing meditation on homes offers by far many more questions than answers” (Clarke 60). The reader’s hopes to be able to assemble the single pieces of the stories into one coherent whole are therefore disappointed once and for all. The only definite conclusion to draw therefore is that stories are never fully linear and complete, neither in fiction nor in real life, and that it is an illusion to believe that it is possible to perceive every single detail of an incident or to know everything about another person. Hence, it might even be possible to conclude that the way the novel is written is more important than its content as its primary aim is to search for storytelling techniques that, on a small scale, reflect upon the limits of human perception, and, on a larger scale, demonstrate how this may reinforce the boundaries and social hierarchies prevalent in Indian society.



### 3.2 Five Stories of Many: Neel Mukherjee's *A State of Freedom*

Born in Calcutta in 1970 and now based in London, Neel Mukherjee has published three novels so far, all of which aim to give a voice to marginalised individuals living in India and abroad, just like Khair's works. Mukherjee achieved his international breakthrough with his second novel, *The Lives of Others*, "[...] an ambitious tale of political and familial tension in West Bengal" (Byatt n.p.) set in the 1960s, which was published in 2014 and shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. His debut novel, *A Life Apart* (2008), focuses on the daily struggles of a gay Indian immigrant in London, and his latest work, *A State of Freedom* (2017), on the hardships of a few specific individuals in present-day India.

#### *A State of Freedom: An Overview of Content and Form*

*A State of Freedom* consists of five separate stories that are only loosely connected and feature characters from different social backgrounds who find themselves confronted with various hardships and dilemmas. As Hamilton Cain notes in his review of the novel, "[h]is [Mukherjee's] characters swing open like doors, illuminating the subcontinent's profusion of languages and ethnicities and revealing tensions that simmer among the affluent, middle-class and teeming poor, between the educated and the strivers" (n.p.). Claire Chambers adds in terms

of the novel's structure that, "[l]ike a kaleidoscope's broken shards of glass that form a beautiful pattern, Mukherjee's fragmentary vision is richer than any attempt to paper over India's cracks" (n.p.). The five parts the novel is divided into must be understood as separate wholes that feature different narrators and form a network that expands during the course of the novel and may go beyond its confines. Four of these stories are told by a heterodiegetic narrator, and one by a homodiegetic narrator, indicating that there is a dominant narrative hierarchy within the network. Additionally, since the network consists of only five major units, there is, in contrast to *The Bus Stopped*, no discernible rhythm (the only exception is the fairly regular rhythm created within the novel's fourth whole). The first whole of the novel tells the story of an Indian expatriate who takes a trip to his home country with his half-American son and tragically loses him there. The following one focuses on another expatriate, a designer and cookbook author now based in London who returns to his parents' home in Mumbai once a year, where he starts getting interested in the lives of their servants. The third whole reports the hardships of Lakshman, who, struggling to sustain his family, starts travelling around with a dancing bear, hoping to improve their financial situation. The fourth one tells the life stories of Milly, a tribal woman and one of the servants of the Mumbai household introduced in the second whole, and of her friend Soni, who turns into a Maoist guerilla fighter after several ill strokes of fate. The last whole of the novel focuses on Lakshman's brother, who has moved to the city to find employment as a construction worker and finally dies there in an accident. Even though the novel presents the fates of only a few specific characters, it provides the reader with a rich overview of Indian society with its various cultural facets and deepening social gulfs. As reviewer Aram Bakshian puts it, Mukherjee's "latest novel, *A State of Freedom* is an impressive, if sometimes uneven, tour de force rich in deeply drawn characters each of whom is also a symbolic part of contemporary India, that incredible, conflicted, kaleidoscopic society that is still a molten, unalloyed mixture of progress and squalor, idealism and cant, humanity and inhumanity" (n.p.). The characters appearing in the novel must be understood as representatives of specific social classes, mostly from the lower end of the hierarchy, who desperately try to find a way out of their misery. Or, as reviewer Eoin McNamee puts it, "Mukherjee picks out the individual and allows them to stand for the whole. Themes and issues give coherence to distinct stories" (n.p.). Hence, the novel aims to construct various Indian social realities by providing insights into, but no complete accounts of, the lives of a few specific characters, who demonstrate, on a small scale, how Indian society is arranged and functions as a whole. As Chambers points out in her review,

[e]ach chapter stands alone, yet together they add up to a glorious but searing commentary on the ‘state of freedom’ (or otherwise) in the independent Indian state. Carefully patterned, with recurring motifs, and ouroboros-like in shape, the text’s odd- and even-number chapters link to each other. In narrating the scattered lives of migrants and internally displaced people, on the move and on the make, a fragmented form is a sensitive and powerful choice. The protagonist of one chapter may resurface again as a peripheral player in another. Through his apparently piecemeal structure and elements of the fantastic and oral ghost stories, Mukherjee bends realism in profound ways. (n.p.)

In fact, one of the greatest achievements of Mukherjee’s work is that it continuously oscillates between fragmentation and unity. Even though the characters appear in separate wholes and the narrators report their individual fates, the stories are part of a loosely connected network, and the characters are united by the experience of attempting to cross social boundaries. The stories must thus be understood as separate units that follow their own logic, and as fragments of a larger whole at the same time.

#### **The First Whole: “A Tourist in His Own Country”**

As in *The Bus Stopped*, all of the characters move within their separate territories and encounter various difficulties as soon as they reach the boundaries of these separate spaces or even try to cross them. The novel opens with the image of a father who is devastated by his son’s unexpected death; as he is trying to pay the hotel bill, “[i]n the peripheries of his vision he could see a small crowd gathering to look at him; discreetly, nonchalantly, they thought. The news had spread. It was then that he broke down and wept for his son” (*A State of Freedom* 3). The reader encounters the father when he already experiences the effects of crossing the boundaries of his assigned territory. After this short introductory passage at the hotel’s reception desk, the heterodiegetic narrator gradually fills in the reader on what has led to the father’s breakdown: “He had hesitated about taking the boy to Fatehpur Sikri right after their lunchtime tour of the Taj Mahal; two major Mughal monuments in one afternoon could be considered excessive. But he reasoned, it was less than an hour’s drive and to fit the two sites into one day was the generally accepted practice” (*A State of Freedom* 3). The trip to his Indian home country turns out to be the biggest catastrophe of his life, and the man notices soon after their arrival that he and particularly his son are strangers in this country. The narrator keeps voicing the father’s worries and concerns about the trip, but at that point it is already too late:

Now he wondered if his son had not found all this business of tombs and immortal grief and erecting memorials to the dead macabre, unsettling. His son was American, so he was not growing up, as his father had, with the gift of ghost stories, first heard sitting on the laps of servants and aunts in his childhood home in Calcutta, then, when he was a

little older, read in children's books. [...] Or could it have been the terrible accident they had narrowly avoided witnessing yesterday at the moment of their arrival at the hotel? A huge multi-storeyed building was going up across the road, directly opposite, and a construction worker had apparently fallen to his death even while their car was getting into the slip lane for the hotel entrance. (*A State of Freedom* 5)

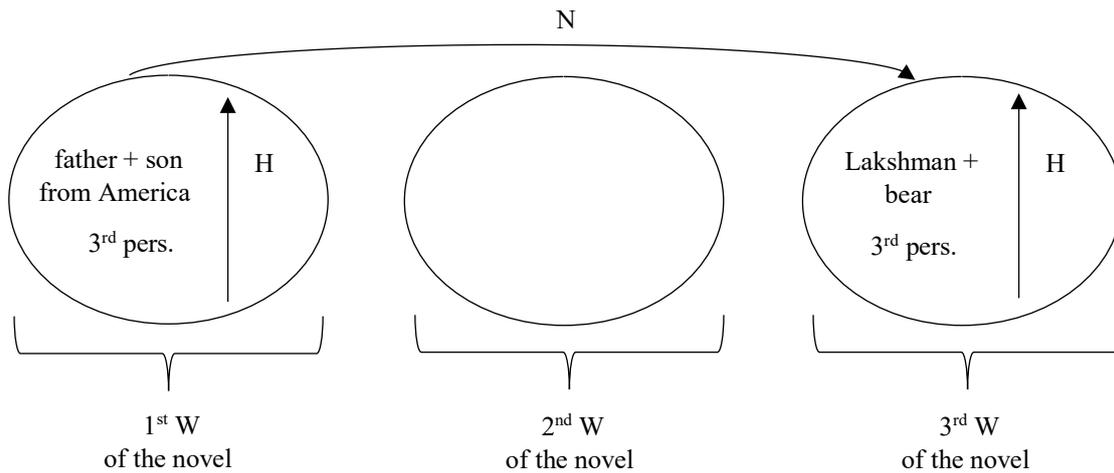
In addition to being worried about his son, who is suddenly exposed to a wide range of new influences and completely different social realities, he feels highly uncomfortable in his former home country himself. The narrator reveals that “he felt, he was no longer a proper Indian; making a life in the plush West had made him skinless like a good, sheltered first-world liberal. He was now a tourist in his own country; no longer ‘his own country’, he corrected himself fastidiously” (*A State of Freedom* 8). Chambers also notes that “[t]he story unfolds the father’s realisation that he now looks at his homeland through a tourist’s gaze, as ‘an utterly foreign country’; its timbre is of foreboding and dread” (n.p.). This impression is intensified when his son later jumps around the squares of a board game in the courtyard of one of the Mughal sights they visit and a stranger approaches them, asking whether he does not know that “it’s bad luck to have children sit in these squares” (*A State of Freedom* 15). The father does not understand the stranger’s outrage, but, when he looks around, he notices that there are indeed no other children in the courtyard. The next moment, the stranger has disappeared, and the father is startled when his son tells him that there had, in fact, never been anyone (cf. *A State of Freedom* 15). As the father is certainly not familiar with Indian traditions and superstitious beliefs, he afterwards becomes increasingly scared, having “a feeling that the walls and stones and cupolas and courtyards were all, as one organism, watching him and his son” (*A State of Freedom* 17). They finally run back to the car as fast as possible, but the journey back to the hotel turns out to be just as unpleasant since “a huge, slow procession of shouting men, hundreds and hundreds of them, coming from the direction in which they were travelling, stalled all traffic” (*A State of Freedom* 18). The next thing the father notices shortly afterwards is a bear looking through the car window:

Encouraged by the unblinking gaze of father and son, the bear-wallah tapped on the glass again, and made a shallow bowl of his palm to beg. Those glittering, scaly eyes indicated a sickness that would finish him soon. Inside, he was too frozen even to shake his head in disapproval. At a signal from his keeper, the bear lifted its paw and replicated the human’s begging gesture. The chain, attached to the animal and run through the space between two of its fingers, obliged clinkingly. He saw the head of a huge iron nail driven through the paw – or was it a callus? The claws at the end were open brackets of dirty gunmetal. The paw could easily smash the window, reach in and tear out the child’s entrails. (*A State of Freedom* 20)

When they finally reach the hotel, the nightmare they have experienced so far continues throughout the night: “Towards the end of the night, the child woke up with what he could only call a howl and continued to cry with an abandonment that brought back to mind the inexplicable and seemingly endless runs of crying during infancy” (*A State of Freedom* 21). The father’s nightmare reaches its climax when, “[b]y the early hours, not far off from dawn, his son exhausted himself to sleep. He drifted off too, one arm around the boy. The light woke him; he had forgotten to draw the curtains in the night. Next to him, the child was dead” (*A State of Freedom* 22). The boy’s death and the previous incident at the courtyard remain mysterious as “Mukherjee offers a literal, if subtle, ghost story in *A State of Freedom*” (Bahadur n.p.). The first whole of the novel suddenly ends after the boy’s death and is followed by the story of another expatriate who returns to his parents’ home in Mumbai for holidays. The tragic story of father and son is presented as one separate whole even though there are unanswered questions and it is not clear what the father will do after the shocking incident. What is clear, however, is the fact that both father and son are strangers in India, who do not have any knowledge of Indian traditions or cultural practices. The father even feels ashamed of exposing his six-year-old son to the harsh realities of Indian social divisions, with beggars and vagrants crowding all the places they visit. The fact that their story forms a separate whole that could even stand by itself emphasises their status as outsiders who are unable to survive in the strange world they have entered. Further, the fact that this first part of the novel only portrays the time they spend in India, neglecting the American territory they have come from and will presumably go back to, at least the father, conveys the impression that they remain caught in this strange place that cannot provide any stability or reassurance. After initially entering this space without any serious difficulties, the father is now made to feel the impact of his crossing of boundaries as it is impossible to leave again without any visible marks.

### **Two More Wholes: From the Periphery to the Centre**

Two marginal characters of this first whole of the novel, namely the vagrant with his dancing bear and his brother, the construction worker whose death father and son witness on the day of their arrival, reappear in the third and last parts of the novel, demonstrating that all of the novel’s seemingly separate wholes are part of a larger, loosely connected network. Lakshman, the vagrant, is moved from the periphery to the centre of the novel when the narrative starts focusing on his hardships in the third whole, positioned right in the middle of the novel.



When Lakshman appears next to the car window with his bear, Raju, in the first whole of the novel, desperately begging for money, it scares and infuriates the father, who is worried that something might happen to his beloved son. Therefore, he eagerly wants the beggar to leave them alone: “He shouted, ‘Driver, why isn’t he going? Ask him again, now. Ask!’ The driver complied, his command issuing more forcefully this time. The traffic unclotted. As the car moved to life, the pinning gaze of those scaly eyes receding backwards seemed to have become a solid, unfrayable rope. Then motion and the gathering dark severed it” (*A State of Freedom* 20-21). This marginal and seemingly insignificant character, who, in the eyes of the worried father, poses a serious danger to his son and does not stop molesting them, is given the power to reappear in a separate chapter that provides his background story. At that point, readers come to realise that the seemingly impudent and one-dimensional molester has a bleak and sad life story to tell himself. When Lakshman appears in a separate whole, his story all of a sudden seems to be as important as the sad story of father and son. The fact that Lakshman’s whole does not immediately follow their story has another important impact on the reader. When Lakshman appears in the third whole of the novel’s network, readers may already have forgotten about the vagrant and the bear from the first whole. In fact, they may only vaguely remember the incident happening on the road as it is overshadowed by the tragic and inexplicable death of the boy in the hotel room. The vagrant and his bear have already fallen into oblivion, but all of a sudden they reappear with a vengeance, making it clear to the reader that they are no impudent molesters but suffering beings with a background story that is just as tragic as that of father and son. Additionally, their story is told in present tense, thus emphasising the urgency of their situation; one day, a bear cub appears in Lakshman’s village, and he has the idea to use it for performances to improve his family’s financial situation. However, “Lakshman’s bright plan to make money from the bear has put in the shade the middle stage between now and that future: how would he afford the animal’s upkeep when he struggled

to feed his wife, Geeta, and his three small children, Sudha, Munni and Ajay, and now his brother's wife and two children, too, since Ramlal had gone to the plains to seek work on building sites" (*A State of Freedom* 91). Despite these concerns and the fact that bear-dancing is now officially banned in the country, Lakshman sticks to his plan and puts all his hopes into Salim Qalander, who is willing to help him prepare the bear for this purpose (cf. *A State of Freedom* 94). Before Lakshman's hardships are portrayed in more detail, the brutal procedure of preparing the bear is presented. As Chambers argues in this context, "[t]he bear is as much a character as any of the text's human protagonists, allowing Mukherjee to reflect on anthropomorphism and animal cognition as well as human abjection" (n.p.). As Salim informs Lakshman, "[a] rope needs to go through his nose. Then some of his teeth must be broken. You have to do them when they're very young, when it is easy to handle them and keep them down. You'll also need a special stick, the one that we qalandars have. But you'll have to pay me to do all this" (*A State of Freedom* 96). Lakshman admits that he cannot give him the five hundred rupees he demands right away but promises to pay the money back as soon as he has earned it (cf. *A State of Freedom* 96). Afterwards, the cruel procedure is carried out:

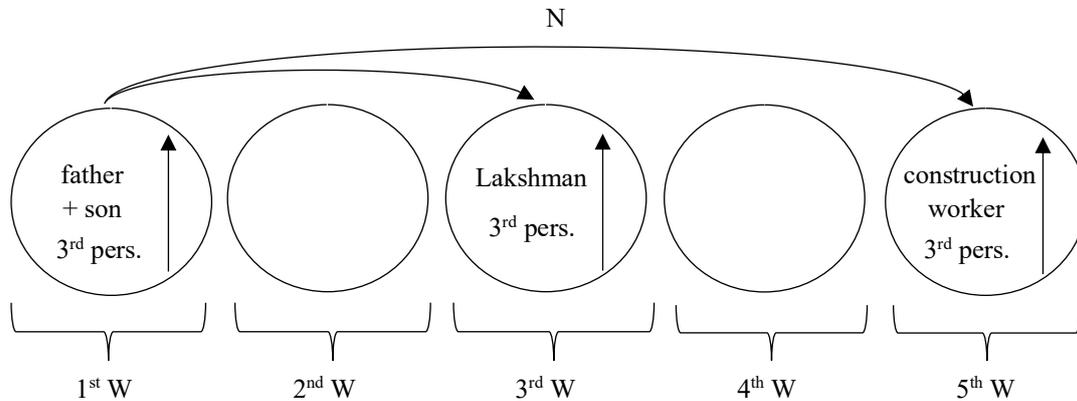
He lets out a demonic cry and with a short, thrusting movement, which seems bathetic coming after that sound, he drives the hot end of the rod through the area just above the dark grey tip of the cub's nose, pierces it in one go, brings it out, then drives it in again a few centimetres above that point, punching a hole through the bone. [...] The cub cannot writhe or move – it is pinned into place at every point where movement can occur. Lakshman feels the tug from the sheer need to move express itself as tiny jerks in the joints of the leg that he's holding down; a cyclone manifesting itself as a breath of air. The red-pink open mouth, leaking liquid, would look as if a moment of utter, grinning glee has been frozen in time, had it not been for the unearthly squeal, dotted with a gurgling rasp, emerging from it. Then a smell alerts Lakshman – he notices that the cub is shitting, and dribbling a few drops of piss, not enough to wet the ground under him. (*A State of Freedom* 98-99)

The passage demonstrates that even the fate of the bear, which was portrayed as an unimportant and frightening creature in the first whole of the novel, is now depicted in detail in the third one. When Lakshman has finally taught Raju to dance after a few months, they are ready to set off and to make money with their performances. As the narrator reveals, "[h]e doesn't really have a plan except to stop at each small town at the end of a day's journeying and make Raju dance the following day, collect the money and move on, repeating this routine until he reaches the city where Ramlal is working on building giant homes and river-like roads and arcing bridges" (*A State of Freedom* 125). When they have made a bit of money after a few performances, Lakshman decides to tie the notes around Raju's neck, believing that "[t]he money is now safe. No one will ever dream of that as a hiding place, should they want to rob

him. Besides, even if they guessed, who would dare approach a bear?” (*A State of Freedom* 144). Lakshman and Raju are not robbed but finally lose all their money in a similarly tragic way. When the monsoon season starts, Lakshman searches for a place they could use as a shelter at night. They are lucky to find an abandoned building, even though “[r]ain is coming into the flat through unseen cracks and holes” (*A State of Freedom* 159). But a few days later, Lakshman is horrified when he “loosens his [Raju’s] wet collar band to take out all his money. What comes out on his fingers are wet shreds, almost a pulp. Incredulous, he takes off the band entirely – Raju is free of his leash for the first time since he was found by humans” (*A State of Freedom* 161). Then, “Lakshman runs his hand first along the inside of the collar, then along Raju’s neck. The paper money has disintegrated into wet confetti. Even the notes that seem to be whole come apart in his hands the moment he tries to lift them out of the soggy mass” (*A State of Freedom* 161). After realising that he has lost all the money they have made, “[h]e screams not from his throat but from his lungs, his navel – the sound comes from somewhere deeper than where the voice is. He screams and screams and screams until there is no sound left in him” (*A State of Freedom* 162). Thus, the third whole of the network ends just as tragically as the first one. The characters that have appeared to be marginal and insignificant in the eyes of the American expatriate are now confronted with a similarly tragic outcome when they lose everything they have worked for and eventually have nothing to support the family back home. Like the first whole, this one also ends the moment the characters find themselves in their deepest crisis. Additionally, Lakshman and Raju are also caught in a whole whose boundaries they are unable to break as Lakshman’s plan has failed and there is no implication that his future might be any brighter. As reviewer Michael Schaub points out, “[t]he characters in *A State of Freedom* all want better lives, and – to say the least – they’re seldom rewarded. It’s not exactly a novel that warns readers against striving; rather, it’s one that urges us to be careful what we wish for, and to always be prepared for disappointment. Mukherjee also brilliantly details the brutality inherent in the class system, and the violence and despair that are its inevitable results” (n.p.). The characters of the first and third wholes end up being devastated as they realise what their good intentions have turned into and notice that they have not been able to cross the boundaries of their assigned territories without visible marks.

The construction worker, Lakshman’s brother, who has also marginally appeared in the first whole of the novel, is turned into the protagonist of the last one, becoming a representative of all the silent and invisible sufferers in Indian cities. As Andrew Motion observes in his review of the novel, “[a]t first glance the narratives of the five sections seem discrete, although all tending towards similar interests and conclusions. As scene follows scene, however, Mukherjee

returns to characters and events that have previously appeared only in the background of each story, to flesh out their details” (n.p.). As in the case of Lakshman, the construction worker is moved from a marginal position to the centre, with the last whole of the novel’s network providing a deep insight into his mind directly before his death.



This is the smallest of the network’s five wholes and written without punctuation, thus also visually setting the section apart from the rest of the narrative. The heterodiegetic narrator first reports the construction worker’s hardships and comments on his bad state of health:

[...] but the green medicine didn’t work and someone told him that it only soothed the throat and his coughs were coming from deeper down from his centre and now there is the fever chhip-chhup bukhar as they used to say never so high as to fell you never so low as to make you feel that nothing’s the matter with you it doesn’t burn you up but rumbles on a bubbling drain under the surface of your skin and some lafanga mazdoor sleeping alongside him on the pavement near the big chowk so that they can be in the queue the moment they wake up instead of having to walk with a pounding head its shattering weight feeling odd sitting atop the slightly shaking weightlessness of the rest of him [...] (*A State of Freedom* 268)

In this whole, the narrator focuses on the character’s feelings in a stream-of-consciousness manner, revealing his shattered hopes and severe desperation. Additionally, the fact that this last whole is written without punctuation forces readers to continue reading without pause, meaning that they are not granted the chance to reflect on what the construction worker’s situation is really like. This subform (the absence of punctuation) successfully conveys the worker’s hopelessness and feeling of being overwhelmed by the situation to the reader. Further, it indicates that it may be difficult for an external observer who is not in the same situation to fully understand what the character is going through and how he suffers on a daily basis:

[...] and look what happened how many years in big cities two three four he has lost count how many years digging breaking rocks stone bricks digging carrying rubble and sand and stones and cement and sacks on his head on his back digging and lashing two or three ladders together with rope and tying the tall bamboos for the scaffolding

verticals and horizontals in a giant criss-cross and the long training to get it right putting together the bamboo the planks the cloths and securing them to the outside of the building in a way that no one could fall or nothing could dislodge and land on another mazdoor working below [...] (*A State of Freedom* 269-70)

The fact that the passage is not punctuated may additionally make it harder for readers to understand what the narrator is saying and require their full attention until they finally reach the last few sentences that describe the construction worker's misery shortly before his death:

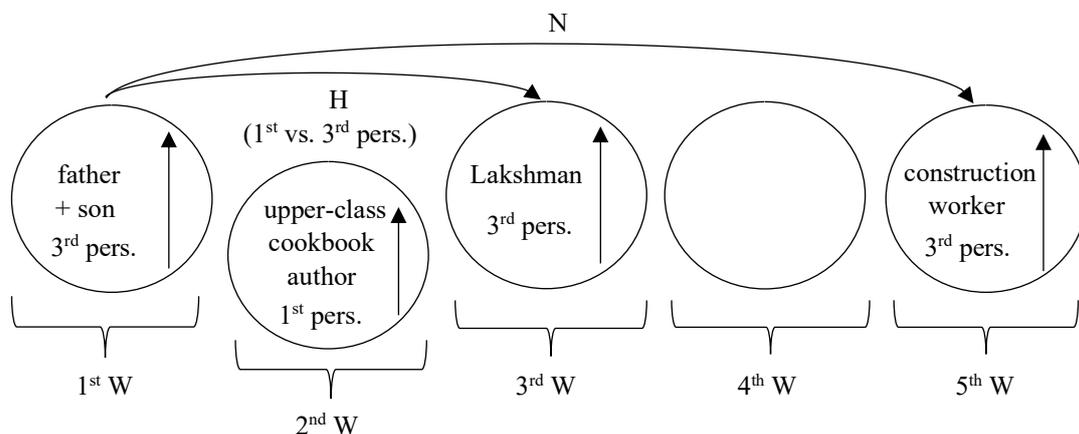
[...] he is not going to look down he is not he stands there shivering the sun is on the other side he cannot tell if it's the fever again he has to finish it no one else is going to do it and they've promised him two hundred rupees today his fingers against the wall and behind and below him air those cloths flapping what were they doing he inches sideways the bamboo sways the next his fingers can get a grip is a foot away maybe two he cannot tell his head is so close to the wall he has to reach that point is he shivering with fear he cannot think that two hundred rupees if he can do five days of this being a bird then that's a thousand he can send half of it home then that effervescing inside him again no he cannot he cannot not before he reaches that point one or two feet away but there's no stopping maybe if he lets one cough out it'll appease the rising creature inside the one who eats the inside of his chest which has become like keema he can feel it one cough he has to there's no choice he lets out one cough and his chest explodes in one breath all of his life in one breath because everything is air everything pouring up around the rushing arrow that he cuts through the unimpeded air its short embrace he is husk of course he is at last (*A State of Freedom* 274-75)

Just like the first and third wholes of the novel, this last one offers a disastrous outcome. As Sonia Faleiro notes in her review of the novel, “[t]his bleak and entirely justified vision of modern India is what binds together Mukherjee’s stories and indeed his oeuvre. In an arid landscape so inimical to the hopes and dreams of the majority, even those who fight to improve their lives will fail” (n.p.). The fact that the construction worker remains relatively anonymous emphasises the impression that he is indeed just one of many people who suffer such tragic fates in this country on a daily basis. He could be anyone, and anyone could suffer his fate, which is also reflected by the novel’s network structure as it could potentially be extended endlessly and include many more victims of oppression. The fact that this whole is placed at the end of the novel and ends the moment the worker falls off the scaffolding leaves the reader wondering how many more people from the bottom of the social scale may die the same day, how many more desperate construction workers may fall off a scaffolding due to inadequate safety measures. McNamee further points out that “[t]he voice of the fox boy [the construction worker] is raised above the voiceless, syntax falls away, tongue is given to the ruin and the glory, the unknown labourer is set among the transcendent, the one as vital as the many” (n.p.). The seemingly unimportant construction worker of the first whole is thus turned into a representative of the many invisible and silent sufferers at the bottom of the social scale. The

passage further draws attention to the fact that his life is just as precious as the lives of all the others and that he is also a human being as he appears in his own, separate unit. As Motion also notes, “[t]his linked structure [of the novel] emphasises the value of life as life, regardless of wealth and status and circumstance. But it also conveys a sense of inter-relatedness that allows Mukherjee to say something about how families and communities work in general, and about how Indian society functions in particular” (n.p.). The rules and boundaries that exist in this society make it impossible for the worker to break out of his assigned territory. Even though he was able to move from the country to the city, his situation has not changed considerably. Thus, the novel’s structural arrangement has two important functions. It empowers initially marginalised characters, giving them a voice and raising awareness of their daily hardships in their own, individual wholes, while at the same time marking the boundaries of the social territories they will never escape from.

### The Whole of an Upper-Class Character

The way Indian society functions is also demonstrated in the second whole of the novel’s network, which focuses on a rich designer and cookbook author who is now based in London but visits his parents’ home in Mumbai once a year. This whole (as well as the fourth one) sheds light on the relationships between masters and servants, highlighting the persistent hierarchies in Indian society. This second whole stands out as it is the only part of the novel that is written in the first person. Since all of the other parts of the novel are told by a heterodiegetic narrator, this homodiegetic narrator of the second whole seems to have less authority and is placed ‘behind’ the other narrator, which creates a dominant narrative hierarchy within the network. Nevertheless, this narrator from the upper end of the social scale is fairly liberal and open-minded, displaying an interest in the living circumstances of his parents’ servants.



For instance, when their cook, Renu, tells her employers that her neighbourhood was flooded the day before, the narrator is genuinely worried about her:

‘I had no sleep last night,’ Renu began. ‘The police came in vans and asked us to get out of our rooms. The sea was rising because of the rain, they asked us to get out, they thought our jhopri was going to be swallowed under water.’

She could barely stand straight on her feet.

‘Not a wink of sleep,’ she said. ‘They chased us out at ten, then asked us to go back in around midnight, then they came at two again and drove us out. I’ve had to work all day after a night of no sleep...I can’t keep my eyes open. So I was thinking, I know it’s too early, but if I start now and cook something quickly, I...I could...’

Something about her unbending sense of duty pierced me. I said, ‘Nothing doing. You go home right now, there’s no need to cook tonight. You go get some sleep.’

Ma added her voice to this – ‘Yes, Renu, don’t worry about cooking this evening, you go back home.’ (*A State of Freedom* 28)

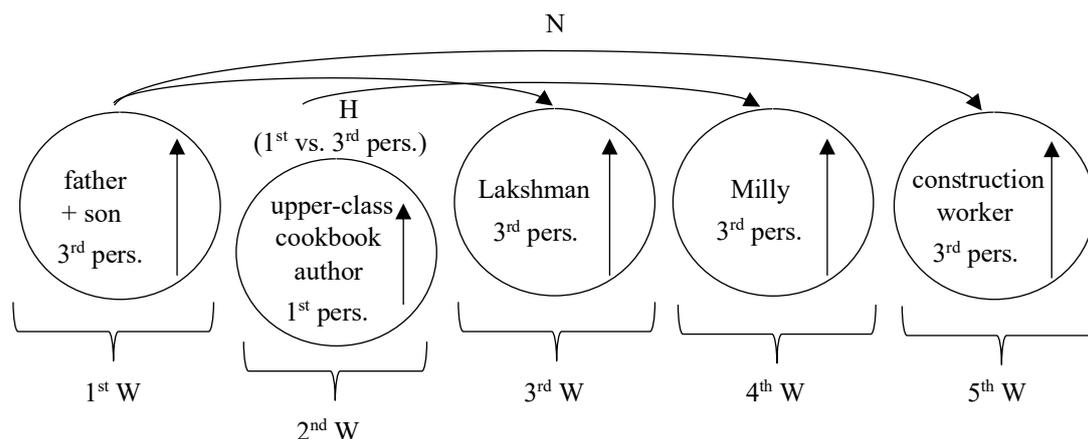
Even though the chapter is not written from Renu’s perspective, the first-person narrator grants her the freedom to report her experience in direct speech. Schaub adds in his review that “[...] Mukherjee isn’t judgmental; his tone is matter-of-fact, not polemical” (n.p.). The narrator and his mother are genuinely interested in the living circumstances of their servants, an impression that is emphasised when the narrator later reveals that he “wanted to ask her so much more: the layout of her living quarters in the slum, how many people had been dragged out of bed and made to stand out in the driving rain all night as a way of preventing death by flooding, how close the slum was to the sea...but she was gone” (*A State of Freedom* 29). The fact that the rich expatriate functions as a first-person narrator in this whole of the novel and is in control of his narrative initially reflects the social hierarchy that exists between the servants, himself and his family in narrative terms. However, the fact that he genuinely feels sorry for the servants and also seems to be slightly naïve weakens the impression of hierarchical arrangements that actually exist in both social and narrative terms. Additionally, this whole also forms a contrast to the first one of the novel’s network as the expatriate who is presented there is not willing to engage with the customs and traditions of his native country. The fact that these two expatriates appear in separate but consecutive wholes of the novel therefore places emphasis on how differently Indians who return to their native country may perceive the social realities they encounter there. Even though they have both left their home country behind, they cannot be positioned within the same whole. Whereas the protagonist of the network’s first whole wishes that the people from the bottom of the social scale did not exist and quickly comes to realise that he is now a tourist in his home country, the protagonist of the second one even takes a trip to the slum Renu lives in. However, he also feels uncomfortable when he arrives at the slum and notices that their living conditions are far worse than he had been able to imagine: “Not for

the first time I wished I had listened to my mother; I had failed to imagine how other people live. But why did Renu insist on me visiting if she knew, as she must have done, that this visit would fairly bristle with all kinds of awkwardnesses and contretemps?" (*A State of Freedom* 71). The narrator is not able to find an answer to his question and keeps feeling uncomfortable during his stay at Renu's home. The world Renu lives in is not compatible with his own one, but at least he has not turned down the invitation in the first place.

When considering the arrangement of the separate wholes within the novel's network, it is noticeable that the narrative gradually moves closer to the characters at the bottom of the social scale, demonstrating that they are also human beings whose (sad) stories must be told; after the first whole has presented an expatriate who has turned into a tourist in his own country, the second one focuses on a character who occupies a similarly high social position but is willing to engage with the culture of his native country and the people who are not as well off as he is. The whole that portrays the situation of Lakshman and the bear and follows this one finally focuses on the voiceless, who had so far only been presented from the perspectives of the rich. In the first whole, the protagonist views them as marginal and unimportant figures whose sole intention is to molest him and his six-year-old son. He is clearly scared of them, worrying that his half-American son will be overwhelmed when he is confronted with the poverty that surrounds them. The network's second whole provides a closer insight into the living circumstances in slums, even though the narrator is not part of the world of the poor either. The following three wholes that are then added to the network finally focus on the stories of the poor, with a heterodiegetic narrator reporting their fates. The fact that the stories are only loosely connected and could be considered as separate wholes enhances the impression of a fragmented society whose various social groups are forced to remain in their assigned territories as they cannot cross the social boundaries that surround them.

### **One More Whole, Two Different Paths**

The fourth whole of the novel's network focuses on a marginal character of the second one, namely the rich family's servant Milly. Once more, a character from the bottom of the social scale is turned into the focus of attention, with a heterodiegetic narrator telling her story.



The reader does not learn much about Milly when she appears in the second whole as the narrator mainly focuses on their cook, Renu. As his mother tells him, Renu does not like Milly and has even accused her of stealing things from the family. When the narrator talks to his mother about the reasons why Renu may dislike Milly, he does not receive a definite answer: “Beyond my mother cryptically saying ‘Jealousy’ to my question of ‘Why can’t Renu stand Milly?’, we didn’t get much further on the topic” (*A State of Freedom* 46). It is not revealed to the reader what exactly is going on between Renu and Milly, and what causes Renu to suspect that Milly is responsible for the disappearance of a bottle of nam pla one day:

I was contemplating whether to take an auto, go to the shop next to Mehboob Studios and get a new bottle, when Renu said, ‘That person took it, I know.’

‘Who?’ I had no idea what she was talking about.

‘Oi je, the one who comes to clean.’ The words were accompanied by that indicating-dismissing gesture of her hands that I was beginning to get familiar with.

It took a few beats to sink in. ‘Milly? But why on earth would she do that?’ I was genuinely nonplussed.

‘I’m telling you,’ she insisted.

‘But why?’

‘Because she’s like that.’

‘Like what?’ I was annoyed. (*A State of Freedom* 55-56)

The narrator gets annoyed by Renu’s behaviour and keeps questioning her about her suspicions but is finally not able to find a satisfactory answer. The incident puts both women into a bad light; the narrator’s mother finally even asks her son whether “[...] it could be possible that Renu hid the nam pla in order to blame Milly” (*A State of Freedom* 57). The question is never answered but the bottle of nam pla mysteriously reappears in the cupboard the next evening. Renu assumes that “[s]he [Milly] brought it back this morning, when she came to clean, and slipped it in there” (*A State of Freedom* 59). Milly is not given the chance to defend herself, and the reader is left to believe that Renu’s assumption might indeed be right when the narrator

concedes that he cannot prove Renu wrong. Even though he remains fairly neutral and decides not to pay more attention to this unimportant affair, readers may already have started to dislike Milly, but, in the fourth whole, they finally learn more about her background.

Her whole, which is told by a heterodiegetic narrator, opens with a scene of violence that makes the incident surrounding the missing nam pla bottle quickly sink into insignificance:

The first image that came to her when she thought of that day was the way the blood had arced and sprayed as they threw her brother's right hand into the surrounding bushes. Her eyes had followed the flying curve of the drops of blood as the severed hand flew into the bushes and disappeared. What else did she notice? That blood on green leaves in the shadow was not red but black. And even on the green that had the sun on it, the blood was also black until you looked carefully, very carefully, and then it would appear to be red, but only if you already knew that it was blood and, therefore, red, not black. Milly remembered all this. (*A State of Freedom* 165)

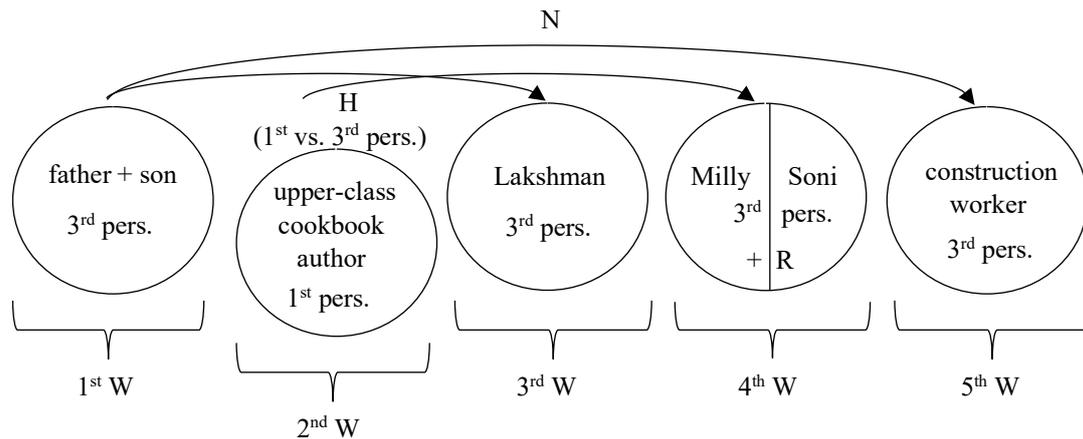
The reader is later informed that freedom fighters of the Communist Party are presumably responsible for her brother's fate and the cruel images that will stick with Milly for the rest of her life. Additionally, this fourth whole of the network covers the longest period of time and is the only one that is divided into subchapters, alternating between the life story of Milly and that of her friend Soni, which creates a regular rhythm within this whole. In the second subchapter, the narrator reveals that "Milly, at the age of eight, was taken out [of school] and sent by her mother to work as a housemaid in distant Dumri, eight hours by bus from her village. The family desperately needed the money, and her mother, who tried to hold everything together, couldn't see how they were to hold off starvation if Milly wasn't sent away" (*A State of Freedom* 170). The heterodiegetic narrator places emphasis on the hardships Milly has to endure during her entire life. The fact that her story is (in contrast to Renu's) not told by the rich narrator of the second whole of the novel breaks down the hierarchy that exists between them, at least in narrative terms. As reviewer Feroz Rather points out in this respect, "Mukherjee's decision to tell Milly's backstory from a third-person omniscient point of view is a wise one. Had her story been filtered through the foodie's consciousness and told from his point of view, it would have been tinted with his naïve optimism. As such, we intimately learn the details of her arrival in Bombay, and how her first employers abused her" (n.p.). Even though the narrator of the second whole is genuinely interested in the living circumstances of his parents' servants, his behaviour and some of the conclusions he draws are indeed naïve, for instance when he visits Renu's slum and quickly notices that he will "go through the remaining hours feeling like an insensitive ogre of privilege, trampling through their hardbitten lives" (*A State of Freedom* 71). The narrator lives in a world that is far away from that of his parents' servants, which is emphasised by the novel's structural set-up. Renu's living conditions are

presented through his eyes, but the fourth whole seems to provide a more reliable picture of a servant's hardships as it is told by an omniscient narrator with passages of internal focalisation, thus emphasising the narrative hierarchy within the network. Additionally, this stresses the fact that even benevolent members of the upper or middle class are unable to fully grasp the plight of people from the other end of the social scale. When Milly arrives at her first household in Mumbai, she is not even allowed to leave the house, which has a serious impact on her mental health:

Slowly, she became unable to think about anything else. It was not that she needed to go out – where would, could, she go, in this endless city, without knowing anyone? – but something so fundamental denied is that thing made disproportionately enormous, consuming, and she began to think of herself as a caged bird, defined by the fact of nothing except its imprisonment. The Vachanis didn't treat her badly – they didn't hit her, or deny her food and clothing, or shout at her, at least not too much or too regularly [...]. But there were times when she thought that she would happily put up with crueller behaviour if this one overarching cruelty could be removed. What was a slap or two, angry shouting, compared with this? (*A State of Freedom* 228-29)

Even though she is not physically abused in this household, she is denied the fundamental right to leave the building, which becomes increasingly difficult for her to accept. As reviewer Bahadur notes in this context, “[d]espite independence, liberalization, technological advancements, and social movements, centuries-old prejudices and feudal structures still warp lives. Caste discrimination, patriarchy, and exploitative master-servant relationships are still visible in postcolonial India's seventy-first year, perhaps as visible as when those forces set my own ancestors in motion, away from India, in the nineteenth century” (n.p.). Nevertheless, Milly is gradually able to improve her situation, at least to a certain degree. One day, she gets to know Binay, a cook who regularly walks past her window and is willing to help her escape from the oppressive household (cf. *A State of Freedom* 236-45). Binay and Milly get married shortly afterwards and she finds a new position in a household in Mumbai, and, a bit later, even a second one. After her pregnancy, she additionally starts working for the family that also employs Renu as “bringing up a child was an expensive business and the only solution that they could come up with was for Milli to take on another job” (*A State of Freedom* 254). Her salary slowly increases, so that she is later able to send at least her first child to school. The family still live in a slum and Milly is about to take on a fourth job to make ends meet (cf. *A State of Freedom* 259), but at least her employers are fairly generous and she has been able to build up a new life with Binay. She remains in her separate territory and, like the other characters of the novel, will never be able to cross the social boundaries that surround her, but at least she has seemingly managed to make the best of her situation.

Soni, Milly's school friend, is certainly less lucky than her. Her and Milly's stories are told in alternating chapters within the fourth whole of the novel, creating a regular rhythm and thus emphasising the contrasts of the paths they choose, even though they are from the same village. In fact, this structural arrangement conveys the impression that the two girls are part of the same whole until they start following different paths and therefore split the large whole into two parts.



Whereas Milly is gradually able to improve her situation and to build a new life in Mumbai, Soni is stuck in her native village and confronted with many strokes of fate. One day, she notices a swelling in her mother's face; as the swelling and the pain do not disappear, her husband has to take her to a clinic: "Soni's father rode his wife pillion on a borrowed bicycle and took her to the doctor, worrying not so much about the reduced person he was pedalling into town as the doctor's fees" (*A State of Freedom* 176). They are not able to afford appropriate medical treatment, which is why "Soni's mother's body came to resemble a scarecrow's – she could barely eat anything – her face seemed to be sucking up all the matter in her body and storing it in that bulging angle" (*A State of Freedom* 179-80). After several more unsuccessful attempts to take her to the hospital for adequate treatment, the omniscient narrator reveals at the very end of the chapter that

[t]en days after this [unsuccessful trip to the hospital], Soni's mother hanged herself. It was Joseph who discovered her; the tamarind tree from which he found her hanging by her saree was in the woods behind the clearing at the back of the church. It was only after they brought her down that he recognised who she was. She had tried to cut out the tumour at the back of her jaw, almost under her ear, with something sharp. They couldn't find the instrument. (*A State of Freedom* 183)

The chapter abruptly ends after this shocking revelation, emphasising the circumstance that the death of a tribal woman is treated as an insignificant matter in Indian society. As Alessandro

Vescovi adds in this context, “[t]he drama connected to these lives is that they are anything but exceptional, they represent millions and yet they go unnoticed and uncared for by the middle-class for whom they work and with whom they hardly ever speak. Their invisibility is such that they do not gain admission to hospitals, or that police officers can rape women with impunity” (1). The following chapter focuses on Milly’s journey to her first household as a child, whereas the chapter that follows this one tells the story of how Soni joins the Communist Party and becomes a guerilla fighter: “The Party, as the Communist Party of India (Maoists) – CPI(M) – was called, had two guerilla wings; the group Soni joined was the People’s Liberation Guerrilla Army” (*A State of Freedom* 195). The paths the two girls follow could not be more different; while Milly works as a servant in several oppressive households, Soni becomes a radical freedom fighter in the forest. As the omniscient narrator reveals, “[t]here were speeches on most evenings to remind everyone what and who they were fighting, to keep them fervid, their anger shiny and whetted. Her blood ran swifter, hotter, when she listened to the leaders. [...] ‘If you kill, we kill too. If you have guns, we have guns,’ as one comrade had put it so simply. Here was a kind of equality, at last” (*A State of Freedom* 198). The disappointments due to unequal treatment that Soni had to endure during her childhood have finally led her to choose this radical path. After the following chapter, which once more focuses on Milly’s experiences as a housemaid, the two friends meet for the first time after several years of pursuing their different goals:

As if she had looked inside Milly’s head, Soni said, ‘You know, you’ve changed a lot, I wouldn’t have recognised you if I bumped into you somewhere else, somewhere far away from here.’

Yes, that flowing chatter, that complete ease with everything, that’s not left her, Milly thought. She said, ‘I was thinking the same about you.’

‘They tell me you live in big cities now, Ranchi, Jamshedpur. You’ve moved up in the world. You earn lots of money? Have you married someone from the city?’ Her eyes were dancing with excitement.

Milly felt shy and turned her head away. They were still strangers to each other and she didn’t know if their shared past was going to be like a change of weather they could easily slip into as they walked the red paths through the trees, shafts of sunlight falling on them wherever there was an opening in the canopy. (*A State of Freedom* 211)

The two girls have drifted apart over the years and Milly is not able to understand Soni’s arguments when they talk about her reasons for joining the party. As the narrator reveals in a passage of internal focalisation, “[i]t seemed to Milly that they were talking about children’s games, hide-and-seek in the forest, jumping around with sticks and leaping on each other in a game of ambush” (*A State of Freedom* 214). The following three chapters focus entirely on Milly’s life as a housemaid in various middle-class families, meaning that the fairly regular

rhythm of alternating chapters is now broken. In the last chapter that is added to this fourth whole, Milly receives a phone call from her brother, informing her that Soni has been killed: “‘Bullets, not machete,’ he says. Then he adds, ‘I didn’t see the body’” (*A State of Freedom* 263). After hearing the news,

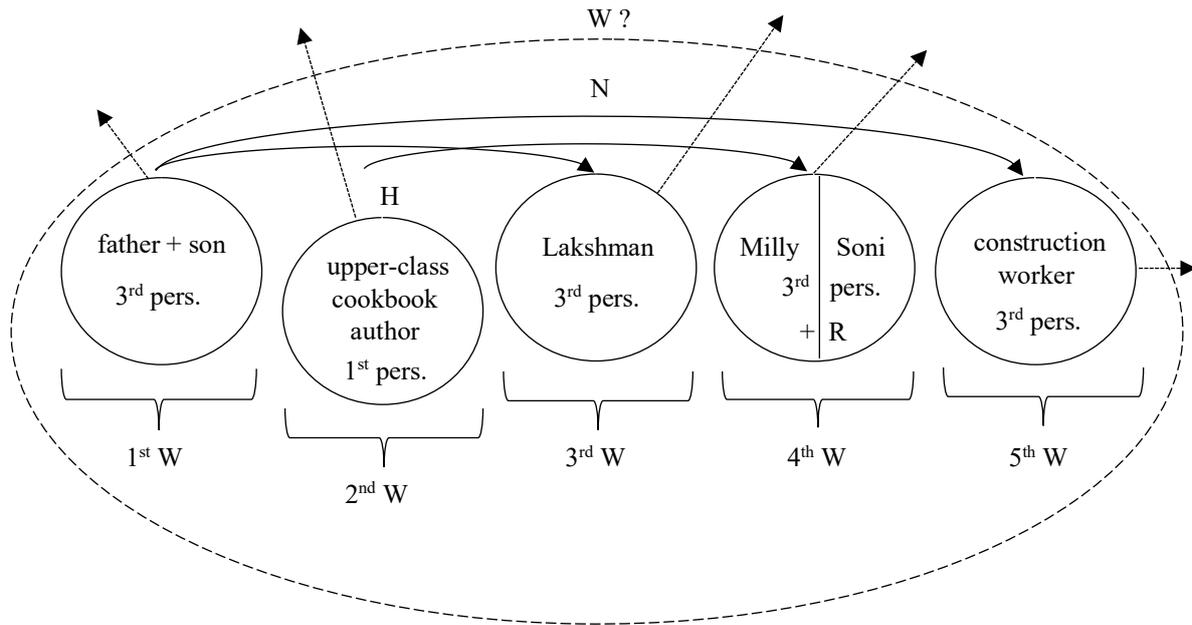
[a]ll the things that Soni had said to her on that walk in the forest tumble through her head. So many questions... Before she has fully finished thinking one, her mind jumps to another. Something Soni had said suddenly appears, like a light she didn’t know existed around a corner: ‘Your life is in bits and pieces – a little bit here, a little bit there. One year in Dumri, another year somewhere else, then another year yet somewhere else again...’ Milly disagrees silently, vociferously. Her life is not fragmented. To her, it has unity and coherence. *She* gives it those qualities. How can movement from one place to another break you? Are you a terracotta doll, easily broken in transit? But she can no longer give Soni the answer, which has occurred to her so many years later. (*A State of Freedom* 263, emphasis in the original)

Milly is finally able to disagree with her friend’s statement, particularly as she has now settled down and does not have to move from place to place anymore. The hardships she had to endure have not broken her because she kept moving on and now seems to have reached a state of satisfaction. Soni, on the other hand, had been convinced that she would never reach such a state in her life and therefore been prepared to fight and die: “If I die tomorrow, my father won’t cry and say, oh we lost our girl, he’ll cry and say, she fought for the people, she laid down her life for the people, she died fighting for adhikaar, for the rights of our people, and they won’t forget me” (*A State of Freedom* 213). The fact that the stories of Milly and Soni are told within the same whole, which is, however, split into several parts, emphasises the circumstance that even people from the same social group may not have the same views or embrace similar lifestyles. Additionally, the fact that they are both part of the same whole of the novel demonstrates that their status as victims of social injustices unites them and that they share a similar territory with similar boundaries. There is opportunity for movement within the boundaries of this space, as Milly’s case proves, but not beyond, as Soni’s case demonstrates. Soni is the one who is willing to cross the boundaries by actively fighting against the inequalities of the caste system instead of just moving within her assigned social territory. However, as it turns out, trying to cross the boundary is a highly dangerous or even fatal endeavour. The novel’s structure visualises these boundaries and opportunities for movement; both girls keep moving within their separate parts of the whole and cannot be united anymore, which becomes particularly clear after their meeting. Additionally, after the meeting, only Milly’s part of the whole is extended and Soni is only mentioned again when she is already dead. When the meeting between the two takes place, it is clear that Soni has already reached

the boundary of her territory and will not be able to cross it without fatal consequences. Milly, on the other hand, is able to move on as she is willing to stick to society's rules and only gradually pushes the boundary further without ever intending to cross it completely. As the novel contrasts these two different life paths within the same whole of the network, it places emphasis on the fact that only the more moderate one will be successful, even though it depends on how one defines success; Soni would certainly be proud of herself.

### **Between Fragmentation and Wholeness**

The fact that all of the novel's stories are told within separate wholes points to the construction of various realities. All of the characters are caught within their own, separate spaces whose boundaries they cannot cross. They have the chance to move within their own territories and, at best, stretch the boundaries to a certain degree but will never cross them entirely. Further, the characters are representatives of specific social groups of Indian society, and the novel's structure places emphasis on the fact that all of these separate wholes can only exist next to each other as elements of a loosely connected network (despite the narrative hierarchy between the homodiegetic and the heterodiegetic narrator) but will never merge into a single, homogenous whole. The novel's form therefore lays bare the structures and ambivalences of Indian society, exposing the optimistic concept of 'Unity in Diversity' as an illusion. Ariel Balter nevertheless argues in her review that "[t]he novel consists of five intertwined stories that could be read independently but also function as integral parts of a unified, cohesive whole" (n.p.). While it is true that Mukherjee's work is more likely to be perceived as a novel than as a collection of short stories due to its network structure and hence subtle links between the separate wholes, it might be problematic to place too much emphasis on this impression of unity. The impression of a unified whole is mainly created due to the fact that most of the characters are confronted with similar hardships and tragic outcomes, but there is finally nothing else they have in common. It might therefore be better to speak of an impression of fragmentation and wholeness at the same time, and hence a continuous oscillation between these two seemingly opposing poles.



### 3.3 Connecting the Unconnectable: Altaf Tyrewala's *No God in Sight*

Altaf Tyrewala was born into a Muslim family in Mumbai in 1977 and is currently based in the US. He already moved to the US in 1995 to study marketing and to take a course in creative writing there before once more returning to India four years later and starting to work in the software industry (cf. Egbert 36). *No God in Sight*, published in 2005 and translated into several languages, is his only novel so far. In 2012, Tyrewala also published an innovative, one-hundred-page long poem called *Ministry of Hurt Sentiments*, and, in 2014, the short story collection *Englischhh*. All of his works focus on the daily life in the city of Mumbai.

#### *No God in Sight: An Overview of Content and Form*

*No God in Sight* tells the stories of various characters from different social backgrounds living in the city of Mumbai at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Like the other two novels, it only provides snippets of the protagonists' life stories and could, in fact, also be considered a collection of (very) short stories. As Marie-Luise Egbert describes the work, "[w]ith some 200 sparsely printed pages, Tyrewala's novel is quite short. Structurally speaking, *No God in Sight* is a loose collection of sketches, or vignettes, linked through little more than the characters recurring in them" (36). Anna Maria Reimer supports this view when she argues that "[t]he

nation in its fragments – thus one might describe Altaf Tyrewala's *No God in Sight* (2005). Comprised of over forty-one interior monologues, the designation of novel appears inapt for this text" (13). However, "[a]s turns out in due course [...] these vignettes do cohere in a quite sophisticated manner, offering to the reader a literary panorama of Mumbai society of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century" (Egbert 36). Egbert later explains how the stories are connected in more detail:

Although most of them could stand by themselves, certain links between the consecutive pieces provide cohesion and coherence. These links are often of a metonymic kind. Thus, a given narrator A introduces the reader to several characters, one of whom then becomes narrator B in the next tale; alternatively, narrator B has not actually been mentioned but is related to narrator A as a friend or as a member of his family. (38)

Like the other two novels, Tyrewala's work aims to construct, and reflect upon, various realities, and the dominant pattern of recurring characters creates a regular rhythm within the narrative. As Egbert adds, this panorama of Mumbai society "includes religious and social conflicts between Hindus and Muslims, struggles of marginalized castes to move to the centre of society as well as the widening gap between traditional social structures on the one hand and the new realities of India on the other" (36). The novel's various chapters or vignettes can be understood as elements of one large, horizontally arranged network; most of the time, the narrators of two successive elements are in some way linked to each other, as Egbert has pointed out, which creates a fairly regular pattern or rhythm. But there are also a few exceptions to this rule, which indicates interruptions within the network that may draw attention to a change in focus in terms of content and space, even though the network continues to expand throughout the entire novel. Additionally, since each chapter is presented by a different narrator, there is no dominant narrative hierarchy throughout the novel.

### **Establishing a Network of Middle-Class Characters**

The first few elements of the network that are presented at the beginning of the novel convey the impression that even though the characters feel isolated, they are in some way connected and equally important. The novel first offers an insight into the Khwaja family, allowing each of the family members to provide a brief overview of their current living circumstances. As Reimer argues,

the monologues are compiled as fleeting portraits or psychological snapshots presented without narrative mediation. In this way their sensual worldliness and immanence in the moment are foregrounded. Admittedly this is no new technique, after all Virginia Woolf already used it in her short story "Kew Gardens" of 1919. As impressions upon

consciousness traced on the surface of the text however, these narrative ‘vignettes’ are engaging for the sense of existential thrownness they project. (43)

Mrs Khwaja is the first one to speak and to provide a short insight into her emotions:

Mrs. Khwaja

I used to be a poetess and would dwell on minute metaphors for days.

Now all day long I cook for Ubaid and Minaz, spend the thousands their father earns every month, and contemplate television absentmindedly.

I have nothing more to say.

The hum of air-conditioned rooms and twenty-four-hour TV has silenced me.

*(No God in Sight 1)*

This short vignette, or element of the network, is followed by the perspective of her husband, who is equally dissatisfied with their current situation:

Mr. Khwaja

Twenty-six years ago I married a mediocre poetess. She gave me two kids – a son who spends every waking hour online, and a daughter who’s never home.

We live together and are still married, the woman and I.

The poetry has escaped our lives. I don’t know her any more. *(No God in Sight 2)*

After another short interior monologue by their son, Ubaid, which is presented in a separate vignette as well, the story their daughter has to tell is slightly more detailed:

I won’t be pregnant for too long now.

After we park the car near Colaba Post Office, my ‘friend’ and I walk to Pasta Lane under the severe afternoon sun. I spot Shamma Nursing Home on the ground floor of a decrepit building.

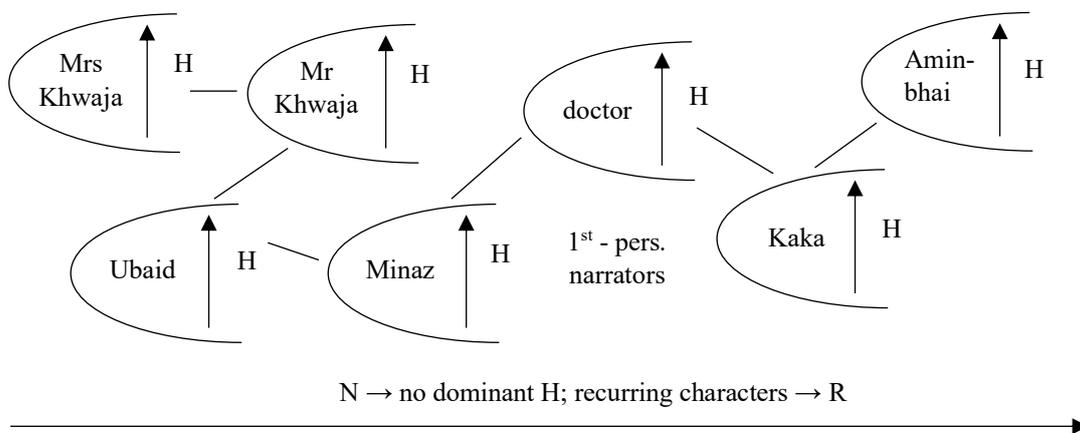
‘We’re here,’ I say, and push open the clinic’s door. Kasim doesn’t follow me in. I come out to the footpath and give him my trademark tough stare – the look that has everyone fooled.

‘Okay?’ Kasim asks. I snort.

In a tasteless display of chivalry, he lets me enter first into the nursing home’s dimly lit waiting room. It has the stench of a chloroform brewery. *(No God in Sight 4)*

Reimer notes with regard to the novel’s structure in general that the characters’ “interior monologues vary in length between half a page and ten pages and are interspersed by typographic gaps. It is these gaps also that determine the recipient’s interaction with the text. But the text is also economic with words, hence its prose appears discreet to the point of frugality” (43). She adds that “[t]he typographic gaps interspersing the paragraphs [...] [further] mirror their narrative configuration as windows onto the private thought-world of the protagonists, while simultaneously underscoring their psychological isolation” (Reimer 44). Hence, “the text epitomizes an experiential, rather than narrative mode of presentation” (Reimer 44). However, Reimer also notes that “[n]otwithstanding the introspective nature of this

conception, consciousness is never isolated as the protagonists are continually confronted with other persons, events and objects that incite a reaction” (14). The separate elements of the network hence convey a sense of fragmentation and the impression that the characters are unable to interact and communicate with the people around them, even if they are close family members. They are, as Reimer has pointed out, psychologically isolated and only grant the reader a short insight into their thoughts and emotions. However, the typographic gaps between and within the single vignettes are a visual incentive for the reader to fill in the content-related gaps. At the end of her three-page chapter, Minaz follows the doctor “into a hot, unventilated room” (*No God in Sight* 7) while Kasim is staring at his mobile phone. The following element of the network presents the perspective of the doctor, who states that he is an abortionist and runs “a nursing home in a seedy by-lane of Colaba” (*No God in Sight* 8). At this point, readers might still expect to be able to assemble the single pieces they are offered into a coherent whole, but when the doctor’s chapter is followed by the story of a completely different family, whose son has started working in the clinic, this hope is disappointed. At the end of this chapter, the boy’s father, Kaka, introduces Amin-bhai, the owner of a shoe shop who wants to move to America with his family (cf. *No God in Sight* 22-23). His perspective is offered in the subsequent chapter, in which he informs the reader about their trip to the American embassy (cf. *No God in Sight* 24). Up to this point, the single chapters are arranged into a horizontal network without any mediating authority that is in control of the narrative. The perspectives of the various first-person narrators exist next to each other and are therefore presented as being equally important. As all of the characters that have spoken so far seem to have a middle-class background, there is no considerable hierarchy in social terms either.



The forms of the content level and those of the structural level are therefore compatible and do not create any tensions up to this point. Additionally, the characters are all linked to the same

place, namely the city of Mumbai. Even though their stories appear to be fragmented as they are told from their individual perspectives in the form of separate vignettes, what connects them is the space they inhabit. Egbert also notes that “[i]f *No God in Sight* appears as a unified whole, this is also achieved through place. With the exception of a few village scenes, the episodes are all set in Mumbai” (38). However, Amin and his family intend to leave Mumbai and hence break out of the horizontally arranged network they are currently part of. When they leave the embassy, Amin imagines what the situation will be like when their dreams finally come true:

Here’s how it will happen: I will telephone Mr. Lakhani. Before sunset he will arrive at the shop with a briefcase containing money and I will sign away this 300 sq. ft., forty-year-old institution of sorts for fifty-three lakh rupees, seven lakhs below its market value. The house will be in a mess when I return. The kid’s will be at the neighbor’s. Rukhshana will be hyperventilating over all the things that need packing, all the things that need salvaging, saving, stowing. [...] A week later – after seven days of shopping, discarding and disconnecting – my wife, my two children, and I will come out of our flat for what I hope will be the last time in our lives. [...] We will become worried and impatient in the long check-in line. The police will question us. Passport officials will question us. I will answer patiently. I may even smile. [...] The aircraft’s projection screen will show a blue India, with our plane’s route so far outlined in white like an anemic tapeworm in the belly of a diseased nation. I will sit back in my seat and pretend to breathe easy. *Forget it*, I will tell myself, *let go*. Let them have it, let them have what they have killed clergymen for, razed mosques for, driven out fellow Indians for. Let them have their Hindustan for Hindus. (*No God in Sight* 30-32, emphasis in the original)

The chapter creates a strong opposition between imagination and reality. The fact that the end of the chapter only presents Amin’s imagination and hopes creates a sense of uncertainty, leaving open the possibility for something to go wrong due to unforeseeable incidents. Amin concludes the chapter by pointing out one of the reasons why he and his family want to leave India behind. He alludes to the religious tensions between Hindus and Muslims and is eager to escape from this situation. As Egbert notes with reference to the novel’s title, “[p]eople’s preoccupation with their day-to-day business seems to leave no place for God. And even where everyday life hinges on religion, the worldly conflicts arising between the followers of different faiths cause them to create their own hells: there is no god in sight” (45). The religious tensions and the oppression of Muslims Amin alludes to imply that there is, in fact, a hierarchical set-up on the content level. The impression of a horizontally structured network the novel has conveyed so far is therefore broken the moment Amin explicitly refers to Muslim oppression, one of the reasons for the family’s emigration.

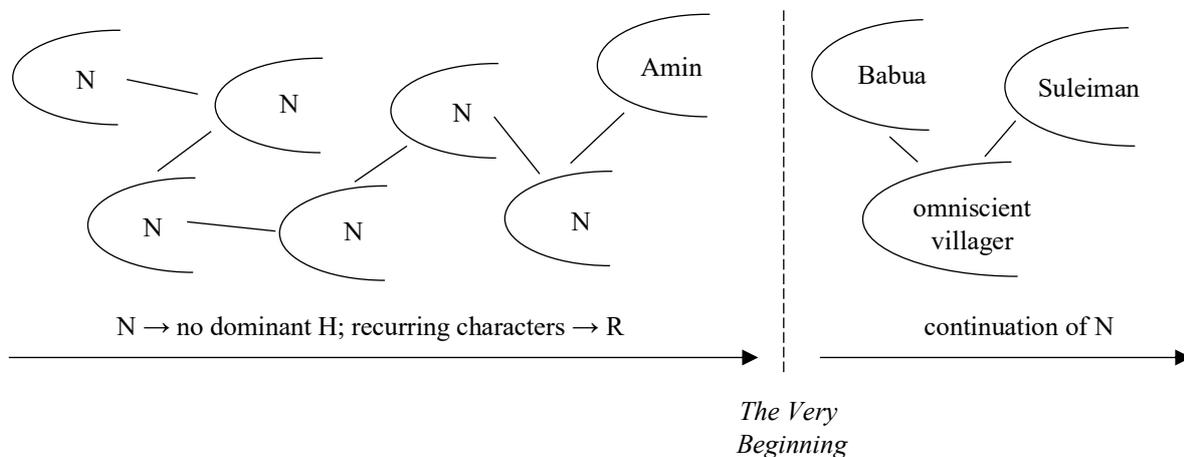
**“*The Very Beginning*”: Focusing on Spatial and Religious Tensions**

This assumption is emphasised by the fact that there is a structural break after his chapter, and a new section, *The Very Beginning*, is introduced. When Amin reaches the boundary he wishes to cross, the narrative is literally catapulted back to the origin of the reasons for his dissatisfaction, which now needs to be explored further. Reimer argues with reference to the ending of Amin’s chapter that “[t]he mood of defiant resignation and the nexus thereby struck between Muslim identity and exile, emerge as defining motifs of NGIS [*No God in Sight*] in the following” (48). As Egbert has already mentioned, all episodes are set in Mumbai, apart from a few chapters that focus on the village of Barauli. These chapters are inserted right at the beginning of the new section with the title *The Very Beginning*, which, in addition to the religious contrasts, places special emphasis on the spatial ones. As Reimer notes in this context,

NGIS also aims at elucidating the demographic and social fault lines contemporary India suffers. Hence if the first section of NGIS explored the psyche of urban middle class Muslims, the second section marks a counterpoint as it is set in a village. But Barauli appears a rural idyll only on the surface. Significantly titled ‘The very beginning’, the second section of NGIS heralds a return, while implying a chronological or causal trajectory thus far absent. (49)

Further, the sense of connectedness during the first section of the novel created due to the fact that “each monologue somehow discharges into the next, manufacturing cohesion by an implicit call and response pattern” (Reimer 44), is broken when the new section introduces a character that is not linked to Amin, the narrator of the last chapter of the first section. Even though the beginning of the new section therefore initially also evokes a break of the novel’s network structure, it soon turns out that the network actually continues to expand during this second section as well. However, the short interruption between the two sections introduces a new focus on religion and space. The first narrator of the second section is a sixteen-year-old youth, Babua, who is bored by his carefree and wealthy life in the village until the arrival of a mahant who is looking for a brave person to drive the Muslims out of the village. The youth is chosen for the task but shortly afterwards publicly humiliated when he mistakes a Sikh for a Muslim (cf. *No God in Sight* 44-45). The chapter in which his mistake is revealed stands out as it is one of the few in the novel that are not told by a first-person narrator but by an omniscient one, as the title *An Omniscient Villager* already indicates: “Yaar. The Sikh got screwed. When Babua dragged Zail Singh to the front, the Mahant took one look and hopped upon his chair. ‘You eunuch! Donkey! Leave it! Leave his beard!’ Babua hung on in puzzlement. Zail Singh lifted his hand with considerable effort and boxed Babua’s ear. Babua fell to the right [...]” (*No God in Sight* 45). The omniscient narrator also reports what happens after this incident; the Muslims

of the village gradually flee without anybody noticing and the mahant is infuriated when he returns with a mob of eighty men a month later and they find out that the Muslim houses have all been vacated (cf. *No God in Sight* 47). As Reimer notes with reference to this chapter, “the exodus from Barauli [is] almost unnoticeable except for the eyes of the focalizer of the above passage, an ‘omniscient villager’ who remains anonymous. It is thus by the backdoor that an omniscient narrating agency enters the text to focus [on] the following events. It is noteworthy that the text abandons the interior perspective at this crucial juncture to give a more comprehensive report” (51). Even though the narrator is omniscient, the report of the incident is not neutral as the narrator clearly takes sides with the Muslims and does not reveal the mahant’s reasons for driving them out of the village, thus exposing his actions as morally wrong. The following chapter switches to one of the Muslim characters, Suleiman, who has fled from the village, and therefore makes it clear that the novel’s network keeps expanding and now once more follows the regular pattern of recurring characters and hence a regular rhythm. The break between the two sections has therefore only introduced a change in focus as the religious tensions now start becoming more prominent but has not caused a severe interruption in terms of formal arrangements.



Suleiman set off to Namnagar, the place where his ill great-grandfather and his children live, and explains to them why he was forced to leave his village. The religious tensions between Hindus and Muslims are later exposed as absurd when it turns out that Suleiman’s great-grandfather is, in fact, only a Muslim convert and a Hindu by birth. He even exclaims “*Hey Ram. Ram-Ram*” (*No God in Sight* 56, emphasis in the original), a specifically Hindu greeting referring to lord Rama, shortly before his death. As Egbert adds with reference to the whole novel, “the use of strong focalization as well as the recurrence of comic relief create empathy

for the characters. They are portrayed with all their human strengths and frailties” (47), which is particularly obvious in the above passages.

Suleiman afterwards moves to Mumbai, where his partner, Nilofer, has already settled down in a Muslim slum flat at the top of a high-rise building (cf. *No God in Sight* 60). The network has now extended back to the city of Mumbai, the place the chapters before the structural break *The Very Beginning* are set in. However, in contrast to the stories of the first part, the characters that are now portrayed are mostly positioned at the bottom of the social hierarchy. In social terms, the switch back to Mumbai does therefore imply a vertical rather than a horizontal movement, even though, in structural terms, the horizontal network keeps expanding. Further, the religious tensions are much more prominent after the break, and the opposition between Muslim and Hindu characters becomes much more obvious. Hence, not only is the switch from city to village at the beginning of the second section important, as Reimer has pointed out, but also the switch back from village to city that occurs when Suleiman and Nilofer move to Mumbai, where “individuals jostle for a space to live – even if it is only in a shack on top of a high-rise apartment block” (Reimer 15). The fact that this second switch back to the city is not marked as clearly as the first one implies that, in fact, the spatial opposition might not even be as significant as one might think at first sight, at least in terms of social status. After all, the villagers that are presented in the first chapter of the second part seem to be far better off than many of the characters that are forced to live in city slums in the following chapters. Hence, even though there certainly is a boundary between urban and rural areas, it is not necessarily a boundary of social status at the same time. In fact, it does not seem to be difficult for Suleiman to move to the city and to cross the boundary between urban and rural, an impression that is emphasised by the fact that the chapters are again connected by the characters occurring in them and hence create a sense of flow within in the network. But, as it soon turns out, it is far more difficult to climb the social ladder and to cross the boundary between rich and poor. As Reimer notes, “[a]bove all [...], the text focuses [on] the city’s Muslim population and their political and social predicament, which reflects the faultlines marking the nation at large” (15).

### **Social Hierarchies within the Network**

The assumption that it is difficult to climb the social ladder, even among the Muslim community, a seemingly unified whole, is confirmed when Nilofer, hoping to be employed as a servant by one of the wealthier families in the building, starts ringing doorbell after doorbell

one day (cf. *No God in Sight* 64). The social divisions that exist between the inhabitants of the building soon become noticeable, and Nilofer wonders how “anyone living below [could] refuse to assist a pregnant refugee from their own umaah” (*No God in Sight* 64). The first flat Nilofer approaches is flat 1401 and the following vignette is only a few sentences long: “A servant? Mad or what! We have nine daughters. The last thing we need is a servant” (*No God in Sight* 65). The tenant of the flat remains anonymous and the fact that only the response is presented but not the question Nilofer must have asked creates a greater sense of immediacy, enabling the reader to imagine how Nilofer must feel when she is rejected in such a rude way. This short vignette symbolises the social boundary that exists between Nilofer and the anonymous tenant of the flat. As Reimer notes with reference to the whole novel, “[w]ith its panorama of scenes, voices and noises, Tyrewala’s text conveys an acute sensation of the massive overcrowding of the metropolis which is subtly reinforced by the minimal space each character is granted in the closed circuit of monologues” (14). This sense of overcrowding is also noticeable in the parts that focus on the high-rise building Nilofer now lives in. In the following chapter, which focuses on flat 1402, there is even less interaction between Nilofer and the occupants as they do not even open the door:

(Still in bed, will not rise for another hour no matter who’s at the door, it being Sunday morning, a day for waking late, although neither has slept all night, anxious as both are over unpaid credit card bills for the garments, gizmos, gifts, and gourmet meals recklessly consumed in conformity with current social aesthetics, and that’s how everything happens here, in flat 1402, slaves to the bandwagon decree, who will not, will *not* rise for another hour no matter *who’s* at the door, it being Sunday morning – a day, for waking, late.) (*No God in Sight* 66, emphasis in the original)

As Reimer notes with reference to this passage, “[h]ere, form and content are at one as the paragraph typographically reproduces the enclosed space of the apartment, the brackets symbolizing the apartments’ walls while the inverse sentence structure creates the sensation of a seamless sequence, comprised of a zoom in and a zoom out, correlated with the brief awakening and falling back to slumber of its occupants” (53). Additionally, in terms of narrative situation, the separate scenes taking place in the building can still be understood as being arranged into a horizontal network since the different perspectives exist next to each other; they do therefore not fall out of the horizontally arranged network in formal terms but allude to a hierarchical social arrangement. There is thus a clear tension between structural forms and social realities during this part of the narrative. The hierarchical social arrangement is reflected by the fact that the tenants of the flats keep rejecting Nilofer, such as the one of flat 1403, who is the first one to start a proper dialogue with her but has malicious intentions:

Holding my loaded gun up, I crouch against the wall, beside the door. ‘Who is it?’ I ask.

‘Salaam-aaley-kum, brother. M-my name is Nilofer,’ some woman stammers in a girl-child’s voice.

‘What do you want?’ I ask.

‘Work!’ she blurts.

[...]

I stand up and place my trembling hand on the latch.

‘Just wait, haanh,’ I say, ‘I’m opening.’

‘Okay, b-brother,’ she says, ‘I am waiting.’

1...2...3...4...I start counting.

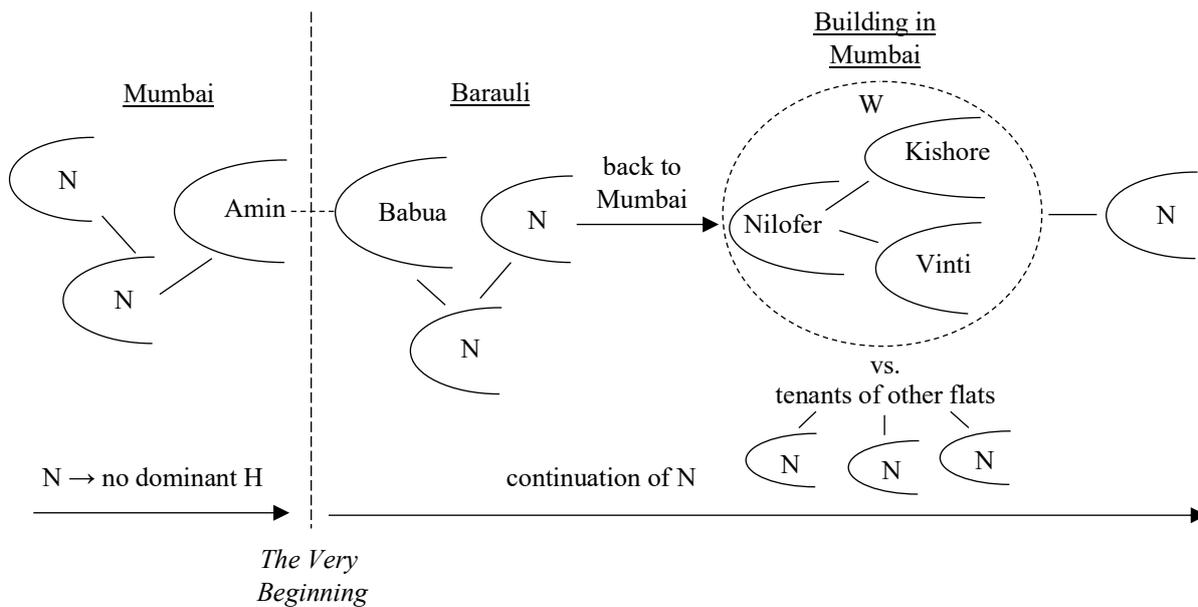
At 20 I will throw open the door and shoot that haraamzaadi’s brains out.

(*No God in Sight* 69)

Reimer observes that, “[u]nlike in the preceding passages [...], the continuous use of the present tense acts as a slight irritant, foregrounding the presence of the narratee as interlocutor and even more as an observer. By recording every action and thought, the text strives to create the impression of ‘real time’” (54). The following element of the network moves away from Nilofer and reports what is happening on the floor above at the same time, where Kishore Malhotra, an insurance agent, is trying to sell the tenant of flat 1503 a policy but is unsuccessful (cf. *No God in Sight* 70-71). Reimer observes in terms of this break between the two scenes that,

at this ‘cliffhanger’ moment, the text leaves readers suspended, switching to another, less dramatic scene occurring [*m*]eanwhile, on the Floor Above. If the visual sense was already teased by the previous passages, this dramaturgic device unambiguously advertises the filmic or televisual subtext. At the same time the sudden cut interrupts the lurid fantasy of bloodshed systematically built up by the text. The nonchalance of the filmic interpolation relies on the narratee’s familiarity with the narrative patterns of the episode film or television series, so that she can leave off with the certainty that this narrative strand will be picked up again later. (54)

The subsequent element of the network reports what is simultaneously happening on the floor below Nilofer’s, where Vinti Kambole is trying to sell ladies’ products to a youth in flat 1302 (cf. *No God in Sight* 72-73). The next chapter narrates how Vinti takes the lift to the sixteenth floor, but it “mysteriously halts on the fourteenth” (*No God in Sight* 74), where she encounters Kishore and Nilofer, who is still alive. This chapter brings together the three characters that have so far only appeared in separate vignettes and in different places of the building, assembling some of the network’s elements into a small-scale whole within the network.



They have a short conversation about the experiences they have had so far whilst standing in a building with many rooms they cannot access as they occupy a lower position on the social scale than the tenants. The whole that is created within the network at this point only brings together those characters that are considered outsiders and positioned at the lower end of the social hierarchy. This structural arrangement therefore indicates a specific system of inclusion and exclusion, showing that only the units that feature characters of the same social standing can be assembled into a small-scale whole within the network. Reimer takes a similar view, arguing that “[s]ocial polarities thus intersect here with spatial polarities, wealthy and poor, inside and outside” (78). Only the stories of the characters that are positioned at the lower end of the social ladder can be assembled into a small-scale whole, but their stories cannot be brought together with those of the tenants that are far better off. The chapter divisions therefore clearly symbolise rigid spatial and social boundaries that cannot be broken, even though all of the characters are given a voice within the network, regardless of their position in the social hierarchy.

#### **Unusual Connections: A Small-Scale Network of Sohails**

After the chapters that provide insights into the tenants of the different flats, the novel reverts to the previous pattern that the narrator of chapter A mentions a character who then turns into the narrator of chapter B, thus reviving the strong sense of connectedness that had existed at the beginning of the novel. The narrative first moves on to a chapter called *Flat 1404: Munaf, the Unsuitable Boy*, whose protagonist suffers from polio and is about to meet a girl who might

consent to an arranged marriage despite his disability (cf. *No God in Sight* 79-83). The novel follows the same pattern until the case of Sohail comes up. Sohail disappears one day and is apparently shot by the police as he is part of a group of terrorists who had presumably planned an attack on the Prime Minister. Police officer Balbir Pasha is afterwards eager to find journalists who report on the crime. However, the journalists leave the scene when they are informed about a more interesting incident (cf. *No God in Sight* 136-38). Unlike most of the other chapters of *No God in Sight*, these episodes are reported by an omniscient narrator and do not focus on a specific character. The chapter *What Happened Next* presents the police officer's reaction upon noticing that the journalists and the news van have left:

The sight of the Breaking News van escaping at top speed stunned the Assistant Commissioner of Police. Balbir Pasha imagined what it would be like if all nineteen news channels refused to report this police-terrorist encounter. There would be no media clamor for exclusive interviews, no public approval or disapproval, and no commission reports or judicial inquiries to divert himself with. Like the director of a failed stage show, he would be left alone in this stinking park with his cast of twenty brain-dead officers and their gruesome props of fifteen rotting corpses. The vision so terrified Balbir Pasha that he crumpled and fell to the ground, weeping like a motherfucking newborn. (*No God in Sight* 139)

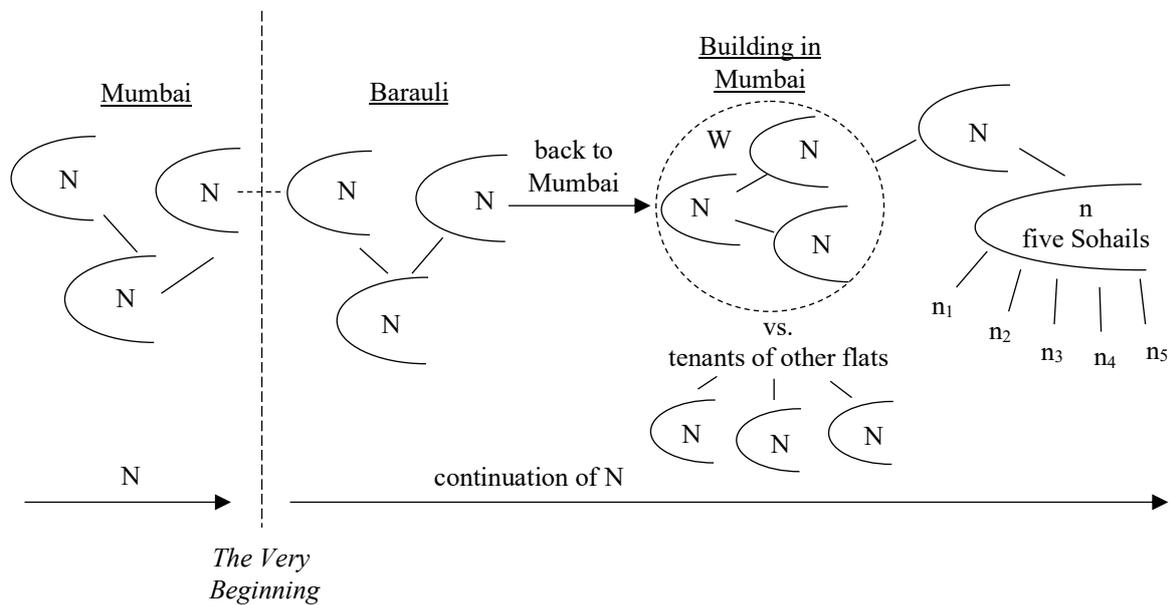
The subsequent chapter of the network, *What Really Happened Next*, reveals that Pasha's fears partly come true. The first sentence of the previous chapter is repeated at the beginning of this one before an omniscient narrator reveals what really happened after the news van had escaped:

The sight of the Breaking News van escaping at top speed stunned the Assistant Commissioner of Police. With expletives ricocheting inside his skull, Balbir Pasha dialed the first news channel that came to mind. Studio staff at MCBC News were rather amused by the Assistant Commissioner of Police's desperate call for coverage. [...] In a matter of minutes the country's TV-owning population – the only one that really mattered – was regaled with a badly scripted, eighty-second report on Balbir Pasha's heroics as well as his unit's stealth and precision. The names of the fifteen dead jihadis were ticker-taped. (*No God in Sight* 140)

Like Amin's chapter in the first section of the novel, these two chapters of the network open up a strong opposition between imagination and reality, and hence also between internal and external processes. The first chapter reveals what is going on inside Pasha's head, whereas the second one focuses on his physical reaction. The fact that both scenes start with the same sentence indicates that they report exactly the same incident, but with different foci. If the omniscient narrator of the first scene did not provide an insight into his mind, the reader would have no access to Pasha's secret fears and only be able to observe the physical action he takes afterwards in the subsequent chapter. This arrangement raises awareness of the fact that humans do not have direct access to other people's internal thought processes in real-life situations and

would only be able to observe their external actions. Additionally, Pasha's fears are portrayed as ridiculous by the omniscient narrator, who is also able to provide an overview of the other characters that are affected by the incident, concluding the chapter with the observation that, "in the same city, for the first time in their lives, several ordinary men grew conscious of their name, for they shared it with a dead terrorist – Sohail Tambawala" (*No God in Sight* 141). The omniscient narrator thus also draws attention to the fact that the incident does not only affect Pasha, who interprets the situation in the light of his personal circumstances, but also many other characters, who might even be affected on a deeper level and in a completely different way. As Reimer notes with reference to these chapters, "[a]fter tendering two alternative narratives, the text now compiles the monologues of no less than five Sohail Tambawalas. This 'multiple choice' framing creates momentum as the narrating agency momentarily suspends its directive function while leaving readers to guess who of the five speakers the 'real' Sohail Tambawala is" (61). The following five chapters also stand out as they highlight how differently people with different social backgrounds may react to the same incident and therefore create a small-scale network within the large network despite the social boundaries that exist between the characters. The first element of this network features a Sohail Tambawala who is 57 years old: "The death of a namesake is startling, like fate urging one to take note of a life, and death, that could have been one's own. And while one is incapable of empathy for anybody, leave alone anti-nationals, one finds oneself, in spite of oneself, reciting Surah Fatiyah for what could have been the soul of oneself" (*No God in Sight* 142). Instead of providing personal information about himself, the first Sohail Tambawala offers a general reflection on how somebody might be affected by the death of a namesake. Apart from his age, which is revealed in the title of the chapter, he remains anonymous, but his general reflections serve as an introduction to the vignettes of the remaining four Sohails that are part of the network. In contrast to this introductory vignette, the next one offers a more detailed account of a thirteen-year-old waiter who is also called Sohail: "Tamby is what they call me at Light of Asia restaurant. I am a waiter there. There, the TV is on loud all day, placed on a stand facing the counter for the boss's exclusive viewing" (*No God in Sight* 143). He hears about the news on TV and later on that day steals a newspaper from a newsstand that contains an article about the incident, believing that he is now famous (cf. *No God in Sight* 143). The third Sohail is a businessman at the age of 42 who is seemingly embarrassed about sharing a name with a terrorist, and the fourth one a patient in a hospital who is dying of lung cancer at the age of 29 (cf. *No God in Sight* 144-45). Reimer also points out the social hierarchy that exists between the characters, arguing with reference to these text passages that, "[b]y juxtaposing the boy's monologue with that of the businessman

Sohail Tambawala, the text cramps the opposite ends of the social spectrum” (63). The last Sohail is a twenty-year-old aspiring lawyer who even considers a name change as he fears that the incident may otherwise ruin his career (cf. *No God in Sight* 146-52). In contrast, upon hearing the news, the fourth Sohail only wonders whether he will die next and whether all Sohail Tambawalas are unlucky (cf. *No God in Sight* 145). What is also striking is that this fourth Sohail mentions the name of his wife, Avantika, who had in a previous chapter expressed her worries about her husband’s sudden disappearance but is now reunited with him in the hospital room. For several chapters, the reader does not know what has happened to him either and is initially made to believe that he must be the terrorist shot by the police. It only turns out at this point that this is not the case, which indicates how easy it is to jump to wrong conclusions. This circumstance as well as the mere fact that there are several people in the city who share the terrorist’s name additionally lay bare the city’s diversity and the usual anonymity of its inhabitants. However, the fact that several characters with the name Sohail are given a voice in separate chapters within the small-scale network demonstrates that they are, in fact, individuals with separate life stories and backgrounds that would normally remain invisible and unconnected.



The Sohail passages also stand out as they once more break the pattern most of the previous passages have followed. As they are not connected by the strategy of recurring characters, the chapters of this small-scale network convey a stronger sense of randomness and simultaneity. Instead of moving from character to character in what seems to be a fairly consistent fashion, the characters in the Sohail passages are only connected by their name and the fact that they react more or less simultaneously to the same incident. This deviation from the previous pattern

further emphasises the impression that there is a small-scale network within the large network that follows different rules. The Sohail passages can therefore be understood as a separate form with its own dynamics within the large network, drawing attention to the fact that there are several ways to connect people with each other and that these connections are not always predictable. Additionally, it indicates that different people may perceive and interpret the same incident in different ways and that there is not a single or correct way to narrate a story. As Reimer adds, “[i]n their verbal economy, the monologues are not only eloquent testimonies to the total isolation of the psychological subject from others *and* from itself, but to an experience of reality as totally simultaneous, ubiquitous and cyclical” (45, emphasis in the original). Hence, as in *The Bus Stopped*, this structural arrangement of chapters that provide different perspectives on the same incident can be read as a critique of conventional storytelling with one omniscient narrator, even though it is less conspicuous than in Khair’s novel. The fact that the story of the police officer that precedes the chapters on the various Sohails is narrated by an omniscient narrator emphasises this impression. It draws attention to the fact that an authorial narrative situation is unlikely to exist in real life and that the reactions of different people could normally not be assembled into one coherent narrative by one narrator.

### **Connecting the Rich and the Poor**

After the Sohail passages, the novel continues to give a voice to rich and poor characters in alternating chapters, which creates a regular rhythm within this part of the network. The horizontal network most of the characters are part of in terms of narrative technique and structural set-up is therefore expanded, and, at the same time, disturbed by the hierarchical arrangements in terms of social structure. In these alternating passages, it is particularly obvious that “NGIS focuses [on] the city’s different social strata, the ‘invisibles’, i.e. itinerants, rural migrants and paan-wallahs, as well as petty entrepreneurs, policemen, reporters and others more or less precariously perched on the middle class steps of the ladder. But also the odd businessman with a penthouse apartment is among the character cast which thus assembles different strata, genders and social groups” (Reimer 14). Nevertheless, the structural arrangement of the novel conveys the overall impression that their perspectives and stories are equally important and that it is not possible to identify a clear outsider. The hierarchical arrangement in terms of social structure is thus both broken up by the novel’s formal arrangement and emphasised by it at the same time. On the one hand, the characters’ stories and perspectives appear to be equally important and most of them are connected by the

technique of recurring characters, which additionally creates a regular rhythm. On the other hand, the switches between characters from the upper and the lower end of the social scale place even more emphasis on the social gulf that separates them. Hence, there is a certain tension between the horizontally structured narrative set-up and the vertically structured social set-up, which becomes particularly noticeable when, towards the end of the novel, the stories of a female dancer and a rich businessman are contrasted with that of a beggar. The chapter *Much Later That Night* focuses on the dancer, who is on her way home late at night. She is sitting in a taxi when “[t]he beggar rested his hands on the edge of the taxi’s window. The woman would dole out nothing. Neither would she touch her forehead and beg the beggar’s forgiveness. Tonight, she wouldn’t even look at his kind” (*No God in Sight* 183). The beggar appears in her story but is not able to interact with her or to break the social boundary that exists between them. However, the narrator focuses on the beggar’s misery in the second half of the chapter:

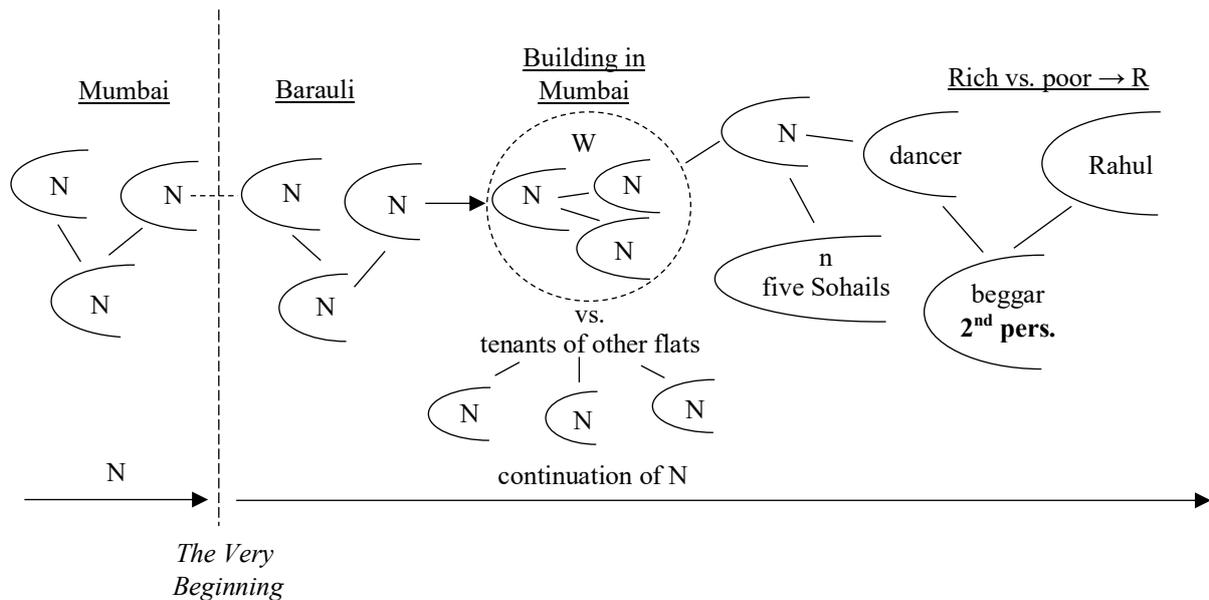
The beggar turned around and walked back to the footpath. He lay down under a bus stop. The taxi sped away behind him. He regretted having tried at all. What a waste of precious energy. The beggar believed he had received nothing from the woman in the taxi. He was wrong. He had been given. The virus transmitted. The score settled. The woman in the taxi had made the beggar – a man, a representative of his detestable kind – endure the agony of his own insignificance. (*No God in Sight* 183-84)

Even though the social hierarchy is not broken down, the narrator focuses on the beggar in the second part of the chapter. The beggar’s and the dancer’s lives are therefore presented as being equally important within the same chapter, and hence within the same element of the network. The reader is thus confronted with two incompatible realities that clash with each other within the same chapter. Reimer adds in this context that, “instead of consigning the beggar to the void again, the text proceeds to present life from his perspective. As a speech act conceived entirely in the second person as an appeal to humanity, *When You Are a Beggar...* is exceptional” (69). The chapter that follows in the network indeed focuses entirely on the beggar and his daily experiences at the bottom of Mumbai society:

#### When You Are a Beggar...

You are free. You can go anywhere. Do anything. No one knows your name. Nobody – not even you – can remember when you were born, how old you are, or how you came to be here. You just are. You can shit wherever, piss wherever, sleep wherever and anywhere. You will eat anything. No matter how putrid, no matter how many mouths have bitten into that paratha in the trash can, you’ll take it. You can wear anything; sometimes nothing at all. You could be lying naked under the seat of a jam-packed train and no one would even notice. It is not easy to die when you are a beggar. Life clings to you like a rabid stray with its teeth sunken into your flesh. (*No God in Sight* 185)

As Reimer notes, “the text does not paint an image of the beggar as altogether passive and victimized, instead sketching a thoroughly human figure with human needs. Nowhere is the sense of existential loneliness that seems endemic to NGIS evoked as powerfully and painfully as in the beggar’s monologue, from which any hint of irony that could provide relief or distraction is conspicuously absent” (69). The monologue presents the thoughts of the beggar appearing in the previous chapter, but, due to the fact that it is written in the second person, it could also be read as a general and impersonal reflection on what it is like to live the life of a beggar in the city of Mumbai, or in any other place. As Natalya Bekhta points out, “[s]everal major uses of second-person narration can be singled out: (1) standard second-person narration (‘you’ designates a protagonist and a focaliser); (2) generic second-person narration (‘you’ is used in the sense of the ordinary function of the pronoun ‘one’); (3) ‘you’ as a direct address to the real reader; (4) the hypothetical ‘you’ (sometimes also ‘subjunctive’ or ‘recipe mode’)” (232). She adds that “boundaries within second-person narrative itself are more than fuzzy” (233), meaning that it is sometimes almost impossible to clearly decide what type of narration it is (cf. Bekhta 233). The chapter of the beggar should most likely be understood as the second type Bekhta identifies. But even if the chapter is interpreted as a generic second-person narration, it creates a greater sense of immediacy than the previous chapters, forcing the reader to think more closely about the described situation. This is also because the chapter on the beggar is the only one of the whole novel that is written in the second person. As it clashes with the forms of the previous and following chapters, it occupies a special position within the network and is also likely to surprise the reader. Reimer further points out that “[t]he beggar’s monologue really marks the emotional climax of NGIS as the harrowing second person underscores the psychological impossibility of ‘I’” (70). The beggar is thus assigned a special status in terms of narrative technique and occupies a place within and outside the network at the same time. On the one hand, his chapter is integrated into the pattern of recurring characters, which makes him seem to be a part of the social and narrative network. On the other hand, his chapter is the only one that is written in the second person, which conveys the impression that he falls out of the network, particularly as he is the only character of the novel that is positioned at the very bottom of the social hierarchy. This implies that even though there certainly are boundaries between the different social groups, they might be fluent, particularly in terms of downward mobility. The contrast in social terms is once more emphasised when the following chapter of the network focuses on a rich businessman, Rahul Adhikari, who is on his way to his office.



He stresses the strong opposition between rich and poor that exists in the city when he explains what is happening in *his* Mumbai: “My Bombay is a cold, dry city. I sleep under a blanket in my Bombay. (Preferably with someone who will go away before I get up, leaving strands of her hair on my pillow and traces of stale perfume on my sheets.) [...] Walking through my penthouse after a scalding shower, I feel shivers in my lower ribs. It is freezing this morning. (But I will not lessen the air-conditioning)” (*No God in Sight* 188). The phrases in brackets appear to be unimportant additions at first sight but could also be interpreted as placing emphasis on the luxuries the narrator is able to afford. What is also worth considering is the fact that the pattern of recurring characters and hence the regular rhythm is broken between the chapter on the beggar and the chapter on Rahul. If they followed the usual pattern of the novel, the beggar would have to mention Rahul in his chapter, and Rahul would then turn into the narrator of the following one. This is, however, not the case, implying that there is no connection between the two but instead a clear boundary that cannot be crossed. Further, “[w]hereas the beggar addressed the narratee without reservations, Adhikari condescendingly casts the implied reader among the lot of those not having the means or will to negate social realities” (Reimer 71). These two chapters can therefore be understood as two separate units that present a clear contrast in terms of narrative technique, are not connected, and display clearly defined and rigid boundaries that cannot be overcome. Nevertheless, the novel’s network structure is actually not broken as the perspectives of the two characters exist next to each other and are portrayed as being equally important. However, the beggar of the previous chapter, or perhaps another one, which does not seem to make a difference, appears in Rahul’s chapter for a brief moment when he is on his way to work: “A shadow blocks the window on

my left – the window I am seated at. The shadow begins tapping lightly from outside. I never look up or out. In my Bombay of incalculable bliss, one runs the risk of throwing it all away like an idiot at the first sight of suffering” (*No God in Sight* 189-90). Rahul does not even look properly at the beggar and only perceives him as a shadow, which implies that even though the beggar tries to break into Rahul’s territory, he is barely noticed and even dehumanised. At least, Rahul orders his driver to give the beggar some money: “‘Give some change,’ I order Chinu. He depresses the button to lower the power window in the front left. He stretches across and offers a five-rupee note through the narrow opening. The shadow outside rushes to the front. The note disappears” (*No God in Sight* 190). In contrast to the chapter on the female dancer, in which the beggar also appears, the narrator does not start focusing on him this time, making it clear once more that Rahul’s territory or element of the network cannot be broken up. Rahul is eager to protect his safe space and to blank out the ‘other’ Mumbai completely as it might trigger a sense of guilt in him, which he emphasises at the end of the chapter when he has arrived at his office: “My office is chilled and muted; it smells of ammonia and mothballs. Ducking past a volley of ‘Hi Rahul’, ‘Morning Rahul’, I sprint to my cabin. At my desk, I slam my head down on the table and exhale with cheerless relief. For one more day, for another twelve hours, I can, I must, I *will have* to forget that your Mumbai exists” (*No God in Sight* 190-91, emphasis in the original). This last statement with the direct address in the second person once more underscores the social contrast and hierarchical set-up that exist between himself and the beggar, and places special emphasis on the fact that “[t]he most consistent and painful affordance of hierarchical structures is inequality” (Levine 82). But Rahul’s chapter also points to the noteworthy circumstance that “life on the other end of the social spectrum is equally marked by loneliness and isolation. The fortress not only shuts others out, it also shuts the resident in” (Reimer 71). The structural set-up of the chapter does therefore not only mark clear boundaries in terms of social status but also indicates psychological isolation. The separate elements of the novel’s network thus come to signify two different problems at the same time and indicate that all characters, the rich and the poor, might be socially and psychologically isolated. Additionally, as Martin Lüdke adds in his German review of the novel, what unites them is the fact that, regardless of their various contrasts, they are all human beings on their journey through life (cf. Lüdke n.p.).

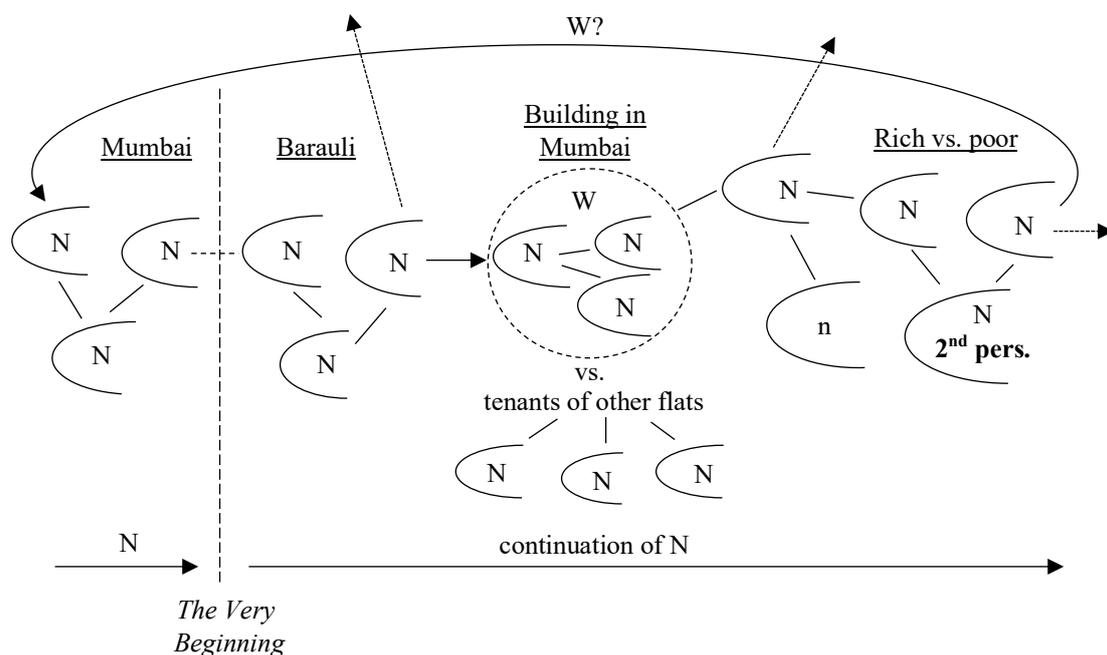
### **Infinite and Circular: Defying Closure**

When Rahul is in his office, he receives a phone call from a young woman, but it turns out that she has called the wrong number: “‘Hello?’ the woman says. ‘Kasim, are you there?’ I fling the handset on the carpeted floor. ‘IT’S THE WRONG NUMBER!’ I yell at the receiver. ‘HANG UP THE FREAKING PHONE! YOU HAVE THE WRONG FREAKING NUMBER!’” (*No God in Sight* 192, emphasis in the original). Initially, this appears to be a random incident, but when the woman mentions Kasim’s name, it becomes clear that she must be Minaz from the beginning of the novel. This seemingly random incident thus implies that, in the end, everything is somehow connected. Reimer further argues with reference to the same text passage that,

[a]s contingency links two strangers, one in desperate need, the other in denial, the latter is eventually confronted with an existential dilemma he cannot simply ignore. Enjoying regular one night stands with random women, Adhikari cannot be sure if he is soon confronted with the same question by another woman. In so far, the call is not actually misdirected. But the name Kasim simultaneously effects a rollback of the narrative machinery: At last the narrative is turning full circle here as the caller must be Minaz, trying to reach her boyfriend Kasim on the morning of the planned abortion. All of a sudden, the previously linear narrative trajectory curves to connect the end with the beginning. But by having the end discharge into the beginning, the logic of temporal succession is controverted. By this unexpected sleight of hand order is (re-)established, albeit not in a teleological sense. (72)

The rich panorama of Mumbai that the novel provides is finally completed by a scene that can be connected to one of the first chapters of the novel, presenting the case of Minaz and Kasim, who are on their way to the abortion clinic. As Reimer adds in terms of this ending of the novel, “[w]hen the text finally returns to the moment and place where it began, the potentially endless narrative horizon previously delineated, is effectively closed. Here, all perspectives are suddenly brought to a convergence. If each perspective implied a negative, unseen space, this negative space has now been delimited. There is nothing left to see, or so this manoeuvre implies. The implied spectator cannot be left wanting” (78). Egbert also observes that “[...] the narrative ultimately returns to the opening scene at the nursing home: the text comes full circle” (38). Additionally, in her study on forms, Levine points out some interesting ideas on the concept of closure in narratives in general: “Closure is typically read as bringing the competing values and interests of the narrative’s middle into a stable containing order. [...] Closure is not only the ending of a story, but the enclosing of discordant energies and possibilities into a single ideological whole” (40). After further reflecting on this idea and considering the ending of *North and South*, Levine draws the conclusion that in Gaskell’s novel, for instance, “[t]he ending’s political force depends not on resolution and finality, but on repetitions that will

expand past the time represented in the text. To call this closure and containment is to overlook the future implied by the text, a deliberately uncontained temporal process” (41). In the case of *No God in Sight*, which does not even intend to assemble the separate elements of the network into a whole and to provide closure in the conventional sense, Levine’s observation is particularly interesting. To a certain degree, Tyrewala’s novel also points to the future as it does not conclude any of the various separate stories, implying that they might continue and expand beyond the boundaries of the novel. However, the fact that the last chapter is connected to one of the first ones of the novel at the same time implies a circular movement not interested in future developments. Nevertheless, it also evokes a sense of monotony and the impression that the characters’ daily routines might continue endlessly without giving them any sense of moving on in life. This choice of connecting the ending to the beginning therefore contradicts the initial impression that, “[t]heoretically, networks are capable of unending expansion: once there is a link between two nodes, there is a network, and it can grow simply by linking to new nodes. Thus the network form affords a certain infinite extensiveness” (Levine 117). However, the novel finally chooses to show that, “in practice, many networks are limited. Some operate as deliberately closed systems [...]” (Levine 117). Hence, the final message of *No God in Sight* remains ambiguous as the novel keeps oscillating between the two poles – infinity, on the one hand, and a circular movement, on the other hand. This ambiguity implies that, in principle, an infinite number of characters could be added to the existing network in the future, but that, in spite of being connected in one way or another, often randomly, the characters remain caught within their separate territories that allow only for circular movement, which might, however, also convey a sense of infinity.





## 4. Constructing and Connecting Lives

The three novels that will be analysed in this chapter focus on the construction of individual life stories, the way these stories are connected to each other, and their embedding into a larger context of social and political influences. Jeet Thayil's *The Book of Chocolate Saints* focuses on the life of Newton Francis Xavier, a famous Indian poet and artist, who, during his final years, moves with his partner to New York and then back to India, where he dies of a heart attack shortly before his final exhibition in New Delhi. While these final stages of his life are narrated in a fairly linear fashion, the details surrounding his youth and the beginning of his artistic career are mostly revealed in the form of interviews conducted by a journalist who intends to write an oral biography of the famous poet. This second dimension of the novel therefore places emphasis on the poet's relationships to a large number of characters who reconstruct his life in an unconventional and non-chronological fashion from their respective perspectives. Anuradha Roy's *Sleeping on Jupiter* also focuses on the life story of one specific character, namely Nomi, a twenty-five-year-old woman from Norway who travels to Jarmuli, an Indian temple town, to investigate her painful past. As Meena Kandasamy describes it in her review of the novel, "[i]nterwoven into this narrative are the story of three conventional old women Nomi encounters on a train, Gouri, Latika and Vidya; the forbidden, same-sex love of her whimsical tour guide Badal for a young man, Raghu; and the hidden demons that possess the photographer Suraj who assists her research for the film" (n.p.). The novel alternates between the stories of these characters, whose paths continually cross without merging into one whole or answering all of Nomi's questions. While *The Book of Chocolate Saints* and *Sleeping on Jupiter* feature one main protagonist whose life path continually intersects with those of others, Shubhangi Swarup's *Latitudes of Longing*, which displays the largest temporal, spatial and social scope, is more interested in the network of higher forces that human beings exist in and that may expand beyond the physical world. More precisely, Swarup's debut novel focuses on the lives of several characters from the Indian subcontinent whose stories unfold in four separate sections that are loosely connected to each other and emphasise the powerlessness of the individual in the midst of a network of various external forces.

The following analysis will demonstrate how the interplay of the various forms that can be identified in the novels draws attention to the constructedness of the life stories of specific individuals as well as to the way they overlap with those of others and are shaped by various external forces simultaneously. This analysis will therefore also show how the

novels' formal arrangements aim to contribute to the constitution of multiple realities, which more conventional storytelling techniques would not afford to the same extent.

#### **4.1 How to Write a Biography: Jeet Thayil's *The Book of Chocolate Saints***

Born in Kerala in 1959, Jeet Thayil was raised and educated in several Indian cities, Hong Kong and New York, and is a poet, novelist and musician. As King points out, “[...] a central theme in his work is his former use of drugs as a comfort against the existential dread of life having no purpose or meaning. The one place in India that is central to his writings is Bombay during the 1970s and 1980s, a time that he and others have immortalized as a bohemian paradise of artists, writers, and drugs before it became Mumbai, and a city of communal strife” (*Rewriting India* 211). This is particularly noticeable in his four poetry collections and in his first novel, *Narcopolis*, which was published in 2012, shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in the same year and won the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature in 2013. Thayil's formally inventive *The Book of Chocolate Saints* followed in 2017, and his latest novel, *Low*, which also “chronicles loss, guilt and the desperation of a grieving drug addict” (Liu n.p.), in 2020.

##### ***The Book of Chocolate Saints: An Overview of Content and Form***

Jeet Thayil's second novel tells the life story of Newton Francis Xavier, a famous Indian poet and painter who has led a life of excess, with alcohol dependency and love affairs gradually overshadowing his success in the literary scene. Reviewer Alexander Larman observes that “Thayil's protagonist is a dissolute, once brilliant man, Francis Newton Xavier [sic], an octogenarian painter and poet who has lost sight of his Indian roots and become more English than the denizens of Oxford and London with whom he rubbed shoulders, Francis Bacon and Muriel Belcher among them” (n.p.). The novel starts when Xavier leaves his third wife and moves with his new partner, Goody Lol, to Manhattan to start a new life there. After a few years, they decide to return to their home country, where Xavier dies of a heart attack after excessive drinking shortly before his final exhibition in New Delhi. Dismas Bambai, a journalist and friend of Xavier's, intends to compile an oral biography of the great artist, consisting of interviews conducted with family members, friends and other artists who know Xavier well. These interviews are used to construct the rest of his life story, surrounding his childhood years and peak of his artistic career. As Keshava Guha notes in his review of the novel, “[t]he biographical arc of Newton Francis Xavier's life and career are a composite of the poet Dom

Moraes and the painter Francis Newton Souza (the ratio will be a matter of debate; I put it at 70:30)” (n.p.).

Structurally speaking, the novel is divided into seven large parts, a prologue and an epilogue. Reviewer N. Kalyan Raman describes Thayil’s novel as a

multilayered work, designed, constructed and rendered with astounding skill and craft [...] *The Book of Chocolate Saints* is divided into seven books. The first, third and fifth books are in the form of interviews conducted by Dismas with people from Xavier’s life as well as poets, critics and impresarios associated with the Bombay poets. The second book unfolds in post 9/11 New York City. The fourth book is set in Bangalore, the sixth in Delhi and the seventh and final in the badlands of Gurgaon, where Xavier meets his end. (n.p.)

In parts two, four, six and seven, a heterodiegetic narrator traces the last few years of Xavier’s life in a fairly conventional and linear narrative, mostly with internal focalisation through Xavier, Goody, Dismas and a few other characters who are in some way related to the artist. These parts of the novel must be understood as closely connected units that are gradually turned into one seemingly complete whole by the narrator. However, instead of presenting Xavier’s entire life story in a linear narrative, Thayil opts for a large number of subjective voices that gradually reconstruct the main part of the poet’s life in a non-linear fashion. The reports of the various interviewed characters are unmediated, forming a network of voices and stories that are associated with Xavier but also entail digressions, showing that “[t]he story is told in many voices, all belonging to people who seem to be adrift in the world” (Raman n.p.). This also means that there are several first-person narrators who exist next to each other and therefore defy a dominant narrative hierarchy. The third and the fifth part of the novel follow the same pattern, employing various reports of people who reconstruct the most important stages of Xavier’s career and private life. Reviewer James Bradley also addresses “[...] the novel’s polyphonic structure, which interleaves interviews with those who knew Xavier with extended reimaginings of his life and the lives of Dismas, Amrik and Goody. These in turn form part of a book within the book, a biography of Xavier by Dismas, a character whose biography strongly resembles Thayil’s own” (n.p.). The fact that several characters are involved in the process of creating Xavier’s biography indicates to what a great extent other people may shape one’s life. Hence, the structure of the novel also places emphasis on the difficulty of writing a story that focuses exclusively on one specific character as humans do not exist in isolation but are part of a larger network in which they interact with other people and their paths continually intersect with those of others. The fact that the chapters that are made up of interviews alternate with chapters in which a fairly linear narrative of the last few years of Xavier’s life unfolds (which

creates a regular rhythm) thus draws attention to the complexity of the process of writing somebody's biography, which might, strictly speaking, never be complete. This raises awareness of the fact that it would therefore also take several perspectives to create the novel's seemingly linear and objective narrative, or biographical works in general. In fact, the novel's arrangement of forms demonstrates that linearity in terms of biographies is an illusion as there are various influences that shape people's lives simultaneously and may lead to setbacks or an exploration of different paths. Additionally, this arrangement of forms in the novel draws attention to the protagonist's powerlessness during the process of creating his biography as others tell his story for him and he is not given a voice himself.

### **The Prologue: Establishing a Narrative Hierarchy**

The novel's prologue seemingly establishes a narrative hierarchy in favour of Xavier as the narrator mostly presents Xavier's perspective shortly before he leaves for New York with Goody. This heterodiegetic narrator begins the prologue as follows:

Praise the broken world for it will vanish in a day and in a day be replaced by nothing. That was the city's message for the rainy season. A fire truck raced somewhere, followed by police jeeps, their beacons flashing on the store windows of Electric House. In the hush that followed, a horse carriage clattered to the seafront and a bus went past and the conductor blew his whistle. Under the covered arcades of Colaba Causeway the pavement shops pulled their shutters for the night and the street sleepers prepared their bedding. (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 1)

After this overview of the city, the narrator starts focusing on Xavier: "Inside the apartment a woman's unceasing tirade rose to its usual pitch of anguish. It was his wife shouting at the neighbours as she did most evenings; but tonight Newton Francis Xavier heard his mother's voice not his wife's and he felt his skin prickle with fear" (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 1). The narrator keeps focusing on Xavier with internal focalisation through him until the end of the prologue, conveying the impression that the following narrative will also be told from his perspective. Hence, the narrator establishes a narrative hierarchy in favour of Xavier as Xavier's story is narrated through Xavier's eyes. In the course of the short prologue, the reader learns that the poet is about to leave his wife Lulu; he makes a sketch of a young woman and puts it into a notebook, in which there "[...] were fifty pages of drawings of the young woman in different rooms and moods, in poses both explicit and demure. Later that night after his wife had gone to sleep he would transfer the notebook to the drawer of her bedside table where household bills lay among manuals and warranties" (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 1). He knows that, "[i]n a day or two, after he had gone, she would open the drawer to look for the

month's electricity and water bills. She would find the notebook and the sketches and understand: after eighteen years of marriage, after threatening to do so a hundred times, he had finally left her" (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 1-2). At the end of the prologue, the narrator also mentions the name of the woman Xavier will leave his wife for and reveals his plans for their future: "Over the next few days they will discuss the immediate future as they have done off and on for a year. Again he will ask her to accompany him to New York where he owns an apartment and a reputation. She will agree [...] and because the young woman's name is a talisman that will get him through the night he says it to himself, very softly, and then he says it once more. Goody Lol" (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 2). The narrator thus makes it clear that Xavier is convinced of his plan and dreams of a good future with Goody in New York.

### **A Network of Interviews**

However, in the first part of the novel that now follows, this story does not continue. Instead, there is a structural break, and, after the insertion of a poem from an apparently unpublished collection with the title *The Book of Chocolate Saints: Poems*, a new form is introduced. It is an interview with Paulita Ribeiro, conducted in February 2005:

**Paulita Ribeiro, neighbour, interviewed by Dismas Bambai in Forgottem, Goa, February 2005**

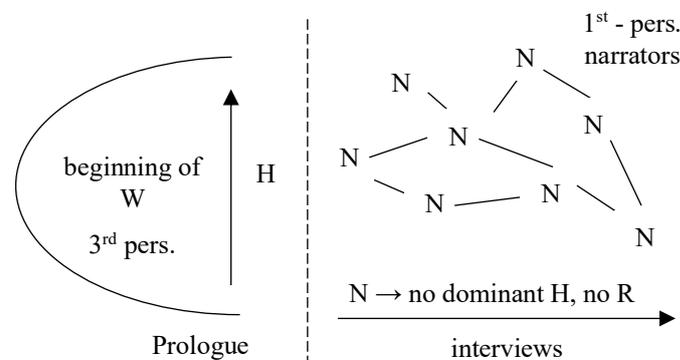
Until the day she went after him with a bread knife we thought his mother was the most ordinary woman in the world. We called her Burial because she was always so cold and formal. My husband's joke, her real name was Beryl. She thought she was better than the rest of us poor componês because she was descended from a long line of doctors. She said her mother or maybe her grandmother was the first female doctor in the country. We didn't know she was mad until much later. [...] What happens when a mother goes mad? I've thought about it a lot because of Burial and poor Newton. An only child grows up thinking his parents are the world. This is what it means to be an adult, he thinks. What he knows of reality he learns from them. But what if one of his parents is insane? And not his father who is mostly absent but the mother who gave birth to him, who fed him, who never smiled or laughed whole-heartedly, who never relaxed because she didn't trust anyone, not even her own son. What does that do to a boy? (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 5-7)

This structural break after the prologue focusing on Xavier might surprise the reader as the following first chapter of the novel switches to a woman who tells the story of a mad mother. However, it soon becomes clear that Paulita speaks about Xavier's mother and that Dismas has interviewed her as he intends to publish an oral biography of Xavier. As Ashutosh Bhardwaj points out in his review, "[o]ver one-third of the novel is devoted to the oral accounts of various

persons Bambai meets through several years for Xavier’s biography” (n.p.). Dismas later reveals what books he intends to work on in more detail:

What would he write? He would work on two books simultaneously. He already had a title in mind for the first, *The Loathed*, about the poets of Bombay in the eighties and nineties. It would centre around Nissim Ezekiel, Arun Kolatkar, and Dom Moraes. The other book would be an oral biography of the painter and defunct poet Newton Francis Xavier. He would use the interviews he had conducted years ago in India and the new information he had uncovered. He would conduct more interviews and update the material. (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 160)

As the novel presents the material Dismas uses for his books, Guha argues that “Thayil’s novel is *The Loathed* plus *The Book of Chocolate Saints* plus a great deal more” (n.p.). The break between the prologue and the first part of the novel is also emphasised in narrative terms. The heterodiegetic narrator of the prologue suddenly disappears, giving way to a series of interviews that exist next to each other in the first part of the novel and do not follow any discernible rhythm. The hierarchy in terms of narrative technique that had existed in the prologue is therefore broken down in favour of a network of loosely connected interviews and hence various first-person narrators who are asked to provide and reconstruct parts of Xavier’s story (and, at the same time, parts of their own ones) from their individual perspectives.



Even though these various perspectives form a horizontally arranged network of stories and opinions that contribute to the creation of Xavier’s biography, they may also contradict each other, raising questions of reliability, for instance when Xavier’s mother is later allowed to speak for herself. This arrangement demonstrates that various life stories may overlap and interact with each other and that Xavier’s story does not exist in isolation but is embedded into a network the other characters’ stories are also part of. The novel does therefore not only tell the story of Xavier but also those of several other characters that are in some way associated with the artist. After the recipient has read neighbour Paulita’s report and her assessment of Xavier’s mother, Beryl is now given a voice herself:

**Beryl Xavier, mother, interviewed by Dismas Bambai at the Bangalore Institute of Mental Health, Bangalore, June 1998**

I remember everything. Believe me it's a catastrophic condition. You develop the long view whether you like it or not. You see the future as one side of a coin and the past as the other, a coin in which both sides are heads, or tails if you prefer – the past and the future, the same! In between, separating them and holding them together, is the narrow edge of the present. For example, you see me here and now, a woman well past her prime in a questionable institution in the shallow south of India, but I am at the same time a young daughter and mother and wife in Bombay and Delhi, and my knowledge and experience are all of a piece. Do you see? Good, it's such a relief to speak to one's equals. Some of the people here, goodness me, I have no idea what kind of accreditation process they underwent. Were they vetted at all? (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 8)

Beryl openly talks to Dismas about her mental issues, believing that she is not ill at all. Her perspective is therefore contrasted with Paulita's, demonstrating how the novel opens up a network of stories that is not restricted to the perspective of one character or one omniscient narrator. Additionally, the interviews are not conducted in the same year, implying that attitudes and circumstances may also change over time and that it is therefore important to capture several facets of a story.

The fact that the novel does, strictly speaking, not only tell Xavier's story is further demonstrated in the fifth part, which also consists of interviews and includes some more reports on Xavier's mother, thus expanding the network of voices. In fact, his mother's story is completed in this part of the novel, demonstrating that Xavier's life does not unfold in isolation. As his mother reveals in an interview, “[i]t is a strange feeling to be released into the world after you've been confined for so long. How long I don't know, I stopped counting. I walked out of the asylum gates and discovered that everything had changed but only on the inside. The core had changed and the outer crust was the same. I was back in Bombay. Alone. My son had left his wife and moved to New York. My husband was dead” (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 347). His mother's life story is concluded by several other characters who talk about her death; for instance, Manoj Patel, a fellow artist, reveals how Xavier got informed about this sad incident: “He laughed and I laughed and after some time Sonakshi also laughed. We laughed and smoked and just then there was a call on the landline from Bangalore. Newton's mother had died. And I thought, yes, this is how it was with Newton. Laughter followed by tears. We spent the rest of the day getting him a seat on the night flight to Bangalore and then we dropped him to the airport” (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 364-65). The structure of the novel thus demonstrates how different lives may be intertwined and that it is impossible to tell the life stories of different characters in isolation as they continually affect each other. Instead, several life stories converge in the novel and form a large and complex network in which the stories

are loosely connected and the various perspectives exist next to each other, without a mediator or omniscient narrator providing a coherent overview or a sense of wholeness.

### **Xavier's Final Years: A Linear Narrative and Whole**

Nevertheless, the novel also presents passages of more linear storytelling in every other part, thus creating a regular rhythm with regard to the novel's overall structure. As reviewer Arifa Akbar notes, "[t]he reports – non-chronological, elliptical, often clashing – are interspersed with chapters written in third-person narration that capture scenes from Xavier's final years. Here we see him as an octogenarian with his last wife, Goody Lol, twenty-something and bisexual, whom he first meets in New York" (n.p.). Even though the part following the one presenting the first few interviews of the novel employs a heterodiegetic narrator, the story is mostly told through the eyes of different characters, mainly Xavier, Goody and Dismas. Nevertheless, these parts of the novel are less likely to be perceived as a loosely connected network due to a higher degree of mediation and a fairly linear plotline, which is only occasionally interspersed with flashbacks or flashforwards. Hence, these parts of the novel must rather be understood as pieces of a whole that is gradually assembled by the heterodiegetic narrator in a systematic fashion. The first of these chapters, which focuses on Xavier and Goody's situation in New York, is connected to the prologue of the novel, which had foreshadowed Xavier's plan to move to America after leaving his wife Lulu. Due to its different narrative technique and higher degree of mediation, this whole must be understood as a separate entity, even though it is not completely unrelated to the network of interviews. The beginning of the chapter, or first piece of the whole that is gradually assembled, first provides an overview of the scenery and then zooms in on Goody and Xavier in particular:

It was the second Christmas of the new century, a dazed and joyless time in the life of the city. Everywhere we looked the storefronts were lit but the lighting was lurid and wrong. Late in the evening the odd lost Santa walked to the park, his bell silent. On the high branches of the trees plastic bags bloomed like flowers. Residual Fifth Avenue traffic sent up a tidal hiss. Above it all the small sky sat like a lid, a sky of ash and tower dust and who knew what powdered human remains. In the old apartment the old body sounds deepened. The conjectural wheeze of hot water pipes, the bone creak of floorboard, all those unknowable scrapes and knocks. And gust after gust against the window where Goody Lol watched the wintry shades darken from purple to slate and then to black.

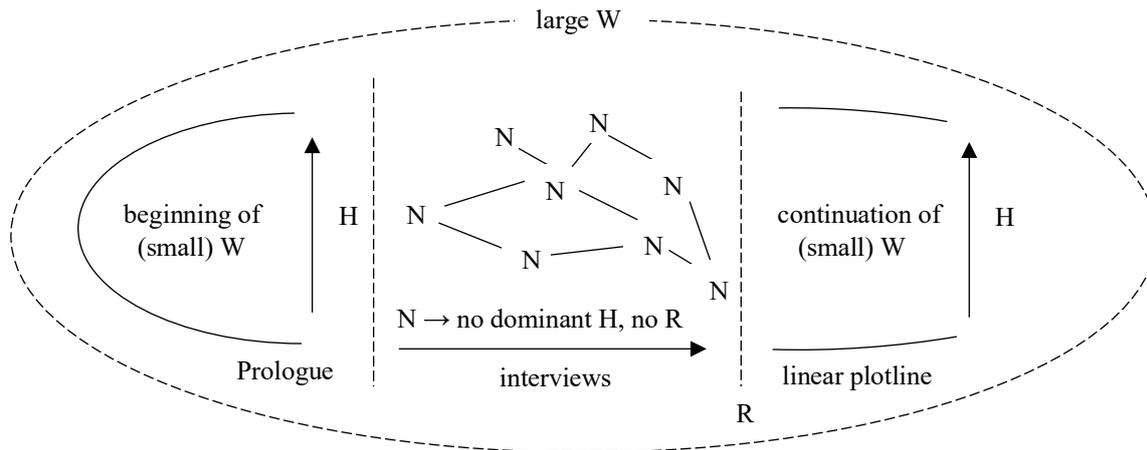
Undisturbed on the workplace were the twenty-three pictures she had placed there that morning. Newton's only task for the day had been to make a final selection for the Chelsea gallery where he would be exhibiting for the first time in many years. He wasn't sure exactly how many years because he lost track of decades (and: wives, a war, three cities, one subcontinent). He lost track of simple tasks. It was all extremely annoying

until you reminded yourself that he could not help it. He had lost track of himself. (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 55)

In this passage, the heterodiegetic narrator makes their presence felt and also seems to draw in the reader when using the pronoun ‘we.’ He thus emphasises his superior position in the conventionally written parts of the novel but also employs passages of internal focalisation through different characters. In fact, there are switches of focalisation throughout the whole chapter and throughout all of the parts of the novel that resemble a more conventional story and must be understood as pieces of a whole that is gradually assembled. For instance, the following passage is focalised through Goody, who is reminded of India and the day of her arrival in New York when she is looking out of her apartment window:

Pulling the curtains for the night she remembered that she had first come to the apartment at the same time of year with the same wintry view from the window. Though the scene had not been so blank. Blankness was a thing come new into the world. She had left the bright winter sun of Delhi for the frigid wastes of Manhattan. Her first sight of the city had been late at night through the window of an airport taxi. Much of it seemed as poor and shabby as a city in India. The cab driver played soft music on a tape deck, choosing from a box of cassettes on the passenger seat. [...] When they got to the apartment New had opened the door with a key he wore around his neck. [...] She had not even put her bags down and he was talking about monogamy or its opposite. For a moment she considered finding a cab, the airport, a ticket home, but his voice pulled her back. He said he was addicted to solitude. He craved it and repudiated it in equal measure. He had grown up with a mad mother and it had marked him. He had started to think about death in his teens [...]. (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 58-59)

At this point, it once more becomes clear that the various pieces of the whole are related to the network of interviews as Xavier had mentioned his mad mother and the fact that the situation has marked him after entering the flat with Goody for the first time. Akbar also draws attention to this connection, pointing out that “[n]eighbours in Goa, where Xavier was born and raised, focus on the damage inflicted by his mother’s mental instability: ‘He had grown up with a mad mother and it had marked him.’ Interviews with the tormented Beryl Xavier herself consolidate this view and incite our sympathy for the damaged young Xavier” (n.p.). Even though the interview chapters must be understood as a separate entity, with the various loosely connected interviews being arranged into a horizontal network, they are not fully disconnected from the other parts of the novel. In fact, the pieces of the whole that make up the rather conventional plotline and the network of interviews both exist within one larger whole that holds them together, at least intending to create a complete account of Xavier’s life.



As Raman adds in this context, “[t]he sprawling and capacious novel contains so much within that to assume a unitary wholeness for it would be to diminish its substance and achievement. It offers an intense and vivid experience of all the events and people it describes” (n.p.). Hence, it does not even seem to be appropriate to describe the novel as one unified whole as it would not adequately describe the work’s great variety in terms of form and style.

The following chapters must accordingly be understood as pieces of the smaller whole within the larger whole. They do not only focus on Goody and Newton but also on other characters who get involved in their lives during their years in Manhattan, once more indicating that humans do not exist in isolation and that their stories continually converge with those of others. As Vivek Menezes notes in his review of the novel, “*The Book of Chocolate Saints* is skilfully paced, telescoping in and out of the lives of Xavier, Lol, Bambai and others in a dizzying variety of settings and time periods, from pre-independence India to America in the twenty-first century” (n.p.). For instance, one of the following chapters that is told by the heterodiegetic narrator as part of the linear plotline switches to Dismas, the character who has conducted the interviews of the novel’s network part. Dismas, who is a journalist for a newspaper in New York, is on his way to interview Newton when the chapter starts:

Some weeks earlier on the wall of a Chelsea gallery he’d seen a black and white flier in the style of a vintage news photo. It announced the showing of a new work by Newton Francis Xavier. [...] To his editor, Mrs Merchant, he had pitched a story idea. He would interview the artist for a one-pager around the show, with reference to the controversy following his statements about September Eleven. On the Internet he found a Hotmail address for Xavier and wrote an email citing his admiration. He mentioned that he’d bought two Xavier oils in Bombay in 1990 from a dealer who had subsequently been accused of selling fakes. Dismas had brought the pictures with him when he moved to New York. He hoped to meet Xavier and authenticate them. There was no reply. Then the editor approved the interview idea and Dismas looked up the phone book and found, to his surprise, that Xavier was listed. (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 63-64)

After the interview with Newton, the narrator focuses on Dismas's background story in more detail:

Dismas's true reason for coming to America had been to get away from the caste-endowed divisions of his homeland and to avail of consumerism as an opportunity for social improvement. He graduated from Bombay University with a degree in economics and sociology. He'd scraped through with a pass and had no illusions about his academic prowess or lack thereof. He realised early that his talent was a modern one. He was a discerning and intelligent consumer of products, substances, and services. America was a Mecca for a man of his abilities and when the opportunity presented itself he applied for a ruinously expensive Master's at the not-so-prestigious Central University of New York. There he managed to bag a partial scholarship available to needy foreign students. Expenses were another matter. As a student he'd managed to keep them down. He had shopped only when necessary and stayed within the spectrum of toiletries and clothes and music. (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 78)

The narrator afterwards also addresses Dismas's difficulties of finding a well-paid job and his work as a journalist for the tabloid *Indian Angle* (cf. *The Book of Chocolate Saints* 79-92). At this point, the narrator also provides more information on the other book Dismas is writing: "*The Loathed*, Dismas Bambai's fictionalised memoir of the Bombay poets, part crime thriller and part gossip sheet, begins with an account of meeting the celebrated painter and poet Xavier in New York City in the early two thousands. The future author becomes an irregular visitor to the artist's cluttered apartment on Central Park West" (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 92). Afterwards, it also turns out that Dismas was once arrested for carrying drugs and that Xavier bailed him out (cf. *The Book of Chocolate Saints* 92). Hence, the narrator starts revealing how the person who is writing Xavier's biography is involved in his life, once more demonstrating that life paths do not unfold in isolation but intersect with each other. In fact, Dismas's first book, *The Loathed*, also affects Xavier's life story as it triggers a controversy and marks the end of their friendship. As Akbar notes in terms of Dismas, "Bambai's journalistic eye spots the baser sides of Xavier too, even if he remains in awe of his poetic genius: the misogyny that leads him to seduce ever younger women and treat them with cruel neglect; the hunger for publicity in his switches from sullen silence to sudden eloquence when a journalist's tape recorder is switched on" (n.p.). Reviewer Agnès Bun additionally summarises Xavier's life story, which Dismas intends to tell, as follows:

For journalist Dismas Bambai, the self-proclaimed biographer trailing Newton from New York to Goa, 'the transformation of the silent young poet to drunken raconteur' is easy enough to track down. The doomed genius leaves behind him a trail of marriages, divorces and paintings as empty as the bottles littering his life, haunted by this thought: how does one survive the death of one's art? What fate awaits the artists who were not 'lucky' enough to meet a conveniently-timed death; what if French poet Arthur Rimbaud had not died at 37? After a successful debut as a poet, Newton runs away from

these questions and their lack of answer, moving from India to New York, London and Paris and then back, wasting his talent, using and abusing drugs and alcohol, claiming the right to survive his art, the right to fail, to be only human, neither a sinner nor a saint, and to be loved despite that. It is no light statement when the book describes poets and saints as sharing ‘the flagellation of the flesh and the lonely difficult deaths.’ (n.p)

In the following, the narrator also reveals how Dismas’s first book, *The Loathed*, is received and how it affects the relationship between Xavier and him:

Xavier didn’t attack *The Loathed* until after its success when he and Dismas had separately returned to India and when the book’s visibility in airport bookshops and lifestyle chain stores made it clear that it had met with considerable success. He told a reporter the book was ‘a malevolent fiction with an eye to commerce and a nose for stink.’ He said Dismas was ‘a loathsome type of insect who invented everything, everything. Why would I say I liked his poems? I never even saw them.’ [...] The book was written partly in the first person and billed as ‘the autobiography of an era.’ Its most scandalous passages discussed the sex and artistic lives of Dom Moraes, Arun Kolatkar, Nissim Ezekiel, and Newton Xavier, all of whom were identified by name; also identified were the men and women who orbited around these figures. Its most controversial passage suggested that someone had murdered Moraes, Ezekiel and Kolatkar. (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 93)

It turns out that Dismas’s work is controversial and that Xavier considers his way of portraying certain aspects of the famous poets’ lives a betrayal, therefore ending the friendship with him; the controversy therefore also alludes to the tensions between Xavier’s own view and that of Dismas, who claims that he is capable of adequately telling other people’s life stories.

### **The Voices Involved in the Creation of a Biography**

Throughout the entire novel, Xavier is rarely given the opportunity to speak for himself. He is, however, given a voice in the form of poems, inserted at the beginning of each part of the novel; Xavier hands a collection of poems over to Dismas at a later stage, and Dismas intends to publish it as part of his oral biography. Xavier additionally reveals to Dismas that the poems are partly autobiographical when he hands them over to him: “Something I’ve been working on intermittently for decades, a book of poems about the black and brown saints of the world. Rather autobiographical, I must immodestly add” (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 312). Even though Xavier is therefore also given the chance to speak in his biography, it is clear that the poems are less straightforward than the interview passages, leaving room for a variety of interpretations. One of the exceptions might be the following poem:

#### **Saint Goody**

or Gudiya, or the Goods, or Ms Lol,

whose forgiveness I do not deserve;  
 first passion, and then its passing, all  
 was decreed by the Summoner of love,  
 all that we are, all whom we fail,  
 all that we in the end must leave.

from *The Book of Chocolate Saints: Poems* (Unpublished)

(*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 394)

Hence, Xavier is only able to speak in his artistic voice in the oral biography, but at least there are also passages of internal focalisation and direct speech in the parts of linear storytelling, which make up the small whole. For instance, when Dismas arrives at Xavier's flat for his very first interview with the great artist, Xavier immediately informs him about the rules for the interview:

I hate being interviewed but you brought paintings all the way from India and I suppose I feel obliged. Let's establish the house rules. No questions about whether or not I'm married and how many children. No questions about alcohol, do I write with pen or computer, first thing in the morning or at the stroke of midnight. No questions about the difference or similarity between poetry and painting. No comments, positive or negative, about my work. No suggestions for future work. No comments at all regarding the future. Otherwise you're free to ask anything you want. (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 65)

It becomes clear from these rules that Xavier feels uncomfortable about certain aspects of his life and is also concerned about the future. Nevertheless, he has consented to the interview in the first place, revealing details about his life in America and his artistic career as his answers are inserted into the narrative in direct speech:

'If you ask the same question you get the same answer. Everybody wants to know about writer's block and how terrible it is. They love the idea of the tortured artist. Nobody talks about how super it is. How much like a paid vacation. You are giving yourself permission to not work.'

'No poems, but the paintings are plentiful,' said Dismas.

'One can only imagine how much worse it could be.'

'Sorry?'

'Imagine when both stop and you are left with nothing but your own used-up self.'

'Is that going to happen?'

'I started to paint because the poems would not come. I thought of it as left-handed work. Automatic. I didn't put much into it and they loved it. They missed the point. The poetry is the point.' (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 70-71)

The interview Dismas conducts with Xavier in his private flat marks one of the few occasions when Xavier is able to express his thoughts about his life and his art first-hand. The network of the novel, on the other hand, does not contain any interviews with Xavier but only with people who are in some way associated with him. Hence, while the narrator provides an insight into

Xavier's mind during the conventionally written parts of the novel, either in passages of internal focalisation or even in direct speech, Xavier remains completely silent in the network of interviews. The two different types of forms, the network and the small whole made up of the conventionally written parts of the novel, therefore also form a contrast in this respect as only the latter includes Xavier's perspectives, which may potentially lead to discrepancies or one-sided portrayals. This implies that there should be two dimensions involved in the creation of a written biography; even though it is important to consider the person's own attitudes and version of the story, there are also several other people involved in the process of shaping and telling this person's life story. This idea is reflected by the novel's structure as the two dimensions are restricted to different parts of the novel but are, in the end, supposed to create one large and complete whole, and therefore a complete account of Xavier's life, even though this task soon turns out to be impossible. It is particularly the network of interviews that makes it clear that this idea underlying the writing process of a biography is actually an illusion as the stories the characters tell about Xavier are subjective and incomplete. Further, the network structure implies that these stories exist next to each other, despite loose connections, and are only seemingly part of a larger whole that provides a complete account of Xavier's life. As Akbar also points out, "[w]hat emerges from all this is a palimpsestic portrait rather than a definitive biography. The intricacy with which its layers are superimposed makes for a complicated novel that suggests the impossibility of pinning down a dead protagonist with any reliability" (n.p.). The fact that the novel switches between these two types of forms further implies that while life is a seemingly linear process, it may be shaped and told by other people in a non-linear fashion. Hence, the implication also is that it is impossible to tell a life story in isolation as it is, in fact, part of a larger network in which it converges with the stories and voices of others. Goody is, in contrast to Xavier, given the opportunity to speak both in the parts that make up the small whole and in the network. For instance, in the third part of the novel, which expands the network of interviews, she is asked to retell the story of how she and Xavier had first met. Her perspective is therefore not only restricted to the conventionally written parts of the small whole, as in Xavier's case. When Dismas asks the question in an interview dating back to 2003, Goody first responds that "[e]verybody asks the same thing. How did you meet? I should think there are more interesting questions but apparently not. Is it the gossip quotient? Is it a way of keeping the social network oiled? Or some kind of leery male curiosity?" (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 224). Nevertheless, she finally reveals the whole story to him (cf. *The Book of Chocolate Saints* 224-41).

### Embedding into a Larger Context

The third part of the novel, in which the interview with her appears, also draws attention to the fact that all life stories are additionally embedded into larger political and social contexts. This time, the interviews of the network focus on Xavier's life as an artist and his relationship to the other Bombay poets of the eighties, whereas the interviews of the first part of the novel had mainly focused on his childhood, his mad mother, and his school years. The network therefore expands in a linear fashion even though not all of the interviews were conducted in the same year, indicating that Dismas has presumably already ordered the material for his book, drawing attention to the fact that it is not completely unmediated either. One of the characters interviewed in this third part of the novel is a journalist who reveals some details on the famous Bombay poets:

I believe the Bombay poets had a knack for cruelty. And if they didn't they developed it pretty fucking fast. They were masters of the number two trades, petit bourgeois petty criminals, habitual drunkards and fornicators, lone wolves and seers, desperados to a man, and they were all men except for the formidable Ms de Souza who had a kind of honorary status in the boy's club. It was a club, no question about it, women not welcome, nobody welcome except the six or seven founder members who appointed themselves dictators for life and locked the door behind them. (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 179)

In this context, Akbar raises awareness of the fact that all of the perspectives that are included in the network are subjective and therefore lead to different foci:

His poet contemporaries, university tutors and fellow arts activists are more interested in Xavier the Artist, speaking in earnest tones of his bold, heretical legacy as one of the 'Bombay poets' of the 1970s and 1980s. (This real-life group included poets such as Dom Moraes and Arun Kolatkar, though Xavier is Thayil's creation.) Xavier's detractors, meanwhile, draw him as an arrogant attention-seeker who, by his autumn years, had worked his way through four wives and innumerable affairs, and was in a downward spiral of alcohol addiction. 'I saw the whole thing, I did,' says one ex-wife. 'The transformation of the silent young poet to drunken raconteur...' (n.p.)

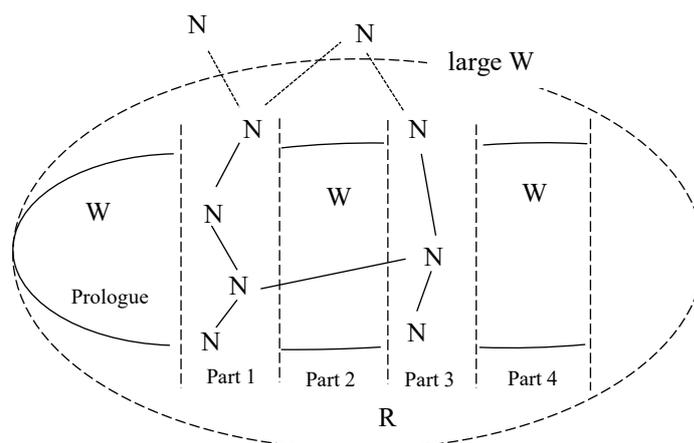
This indicates that it would be difficult to present these opposing views in one linear narrative or biography. Additionally, it becomes clear once more that Xavier's story does not unfold in isolation but is embedded into the larger social and cultural context surrounding the Bombay poets of the eighties. As Raman adds in this respect, "[t]hrough multiple voices, the book describes a whole community of disparate individuals, united by poetry, coping with the challenges of writing in a marginal language and trying to find a space for it" (n.p.). The same is the case when another interviewed character talks to Dismas about the history of Goa, Xavier's place of birth:

Do you know X was twenty-three and living in London when the Indian government annexed Goa? Portugal stole Goa from India and India stole it back. You would have to be a pretty disaffected Indian to say it belonged to Portugal. Or you would have to be from Goa, whose people were constitutionally recognized Portuguese citizens as long ago as the early 1800s. The point is Xavier was Goan before he was Indian and as far as he was concerned the annexation was a clear instance of postcolonial imperialism by the formerly colonised. (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 187)

The fact that the various stories about Xavier indicate that his life is embedded into several larger political and social contexts is underlined by the novel's network structure, which has the potential to expand in various directions and to place emphasis on specific aspects of his life that might be neglected in more conventional biographical works. The network therefore also raises awareness of the fact that biographical works must be selective and that it may be difficult to present certain incidents in one linear narrative. This circumstance is particularly emphasised by the novel's regular rhythm and hence the fact that the novel switches between the small whole the heterodiegetic narrator intends to create and the network of interviews, with the latter showing that the linearity of the former is actually an illusion.

#### Adding More Pieces to the Smaller Whole

Nevertheless, in the fourth part of the novel, Xavier's story continues in this fairly linear fashion, adding more pieces to the novel's small whole and gradually achieving closure, which is, strictly speaking, also an illusion, as the novel's network of interviews indicates.



As reviewer Menezes notes in this context, “[i]n the novel’s final and most impressive third, we get to inhabit the fullness of Newton Francis Xavier as he falls off the wagon, grapples stubbornly with ageing, and slouches unwillingly towards his death. It is an immensely memorable and powerful portrait of the artist’s fiery end” (n.p.). When Xavier and Goody

decide to leave New York behind and to go back to India, they first fly to Bangalore and later move to Delhi. During the fourth part, there are also flashbacks of Xavier's adult years, revealing more details about his ex-wives and the time he had spent in European countries, thus also alluding to the difficulties involved in linear storytelling. For instance, the narrator notes with internal focalisation through Xavier that "[h]e married Edna in the Summer of Love as the sounds of the electric guitar and the Indian hand cymbal wafted through the streets of London. He grew his hair and published his second book and the poetry slowed to a trickle. He started to paint" (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 277). He further reveals more details about his private life, remembering how his wife "sued for divorce and the court liquidated his assets including his art. He was left with very little. When his lawyer advised him to leave town he flew to Milan, where he lived in the immigrant quarter and didn't paint. He went to the museums and wrote (prose) in his rented rooms" (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 277-78). After his time in Italy, "he moved to Paris, where he began to paint in earnest. He made the work that came to be called his Chocolate Jesus Period, Christ stretched on the cross and looking heavenward, a fairly conventional representation, except this was a dark-skinned Christ [...]" (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 278). Even though there are several flashbacks during this part of the novel, the narrative of the present keeps progressing in a fairly linear fashion. After their arrival in India, Xavier's drinking problem becomes more apparent, which also affects his relationship with Goody. As the narrator reveals, "[h]e wanted drink but Goody had put her foot down. His last binge had been a week-long blackout that had ruined his New York opening. Plus, she said, who knew what alcohol would do in his current state? One more binge and she was gone, it was a promise, she couldn't take the stress of wondering if he would drink himself to death" (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 288). He even joins an AA group for a meeting at a restaurant in Bangalore but has a relapse when he afterwards also meets up with some old acquaintances, and ends up in hospital (cf. *The Book of Chocolate Saints* 295-303). At this point, Dismas gets once more involved in Xavier's life as he has returned to India as well and hears about Xavier's relapse on the news:

The caption said: 'IN HAPPIER TIMES. The bad-boy-turned-grand-old-man of Indian art is back in Bangalore. Newton Xavier and his friend Goody Lol were spotted at a lunch reception (*see picture*). Once dubbed 'the 20<sup>th</sup> century's last whiskey priest', Mr Xavier has mellowed with time. These days he conspicuously consumes only water. How the mighty have fallen. Or have they? According to some birds in the know the X-Man was admitted to Asterion Hospital early this week following an extended binge. Watch this space for more details.' (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 305, emphasis in the original)

After hearing this news about Xavier, Dismas decides to visit him in hospital, meaning that more and more pieces are added to the novel's smaller whole at this point, which now also once more includes Dismas. Xavier is not amused about Dismas's visit, asking him where Goody is and then even making the following accusation: "I know you contrived the whole thing to run off with her and take my paintings. I have high-powered lawyers. I have more money than you. I'll make you pay. Bloody hell, I will make you pay" (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 309). When Dismas tries to calm him down, telling him that he happened to be in town when he heard the news about him as he is writing a new book, Xavier gets even angrier: "Why? So you can write my biography and make more money out of me? Nurse, call the police. This man is in cahoots with my former wife. They are trying to swindle me" (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 309). Dismas tries to apologise for the regrettable incidents happening in the past (particularly around Dismas's first book) but Xavier responds that his apology does not mean anything to him and that he should rather lend him money as he is discharging himself from hospital and is "escaping without funds" (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 310). Dismas reluctantly lends him a large amount of money, and, as Xavier is about to leave, he gives Dismas the collection of poems that the latter later intends to publish as part of the biography in return: "'Consider it an advance payment against my debt.' Reluctantly, Dismas took the poems" (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 312). Dismas afterwards takes a train to Goa as he intends to continue doing research for his second book and to visit the Basilica of Francis Xavier. He also buys a book about Saint Francis Xavier and, after reading parts of it, concludes that "Saint Xavier, it seemed to him, was the patron saint of migrants, of drifters and wanderers and those who were misplaced on the planet, those who were missing limbs and homes, those addicts whose addiction was movement without meaning. No wonder X had taken his name" (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 329). When Dismas takes a look at the saint's body in the Basilica, he additionally has the following thoughts: "How far was the reality of the saint's remains from the romantic images of a tall white man with glossy brown hair and trimmed beard, eyes blue and soulful, a youth of strapping build and physical beauty. Here were the remains of the true saint, a small exhausted dark-skinned man" (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 331). It therefore becomes obvious that even the story of a saint is indirectly connected to that of Xavier, raising awareness of how difficult it is to decide which details are needed to narrate somebody's life story and to create an impression of wholeness. Dismas, whose life is also interwoven with that of Xavier, faces financial difficulties, particularly after lending Xavier such a large amount of money. The narrator notes in this context that "Xavier had taken his travel funds on a whim. For X the amount was little more than small change, but for Dismas it was a catastrophe. He would have

to find work. Or cut short his stay in Goa and his travels around the country interviewing those who had known Xavier in his youth and middle age” (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 329-30).

During the sixth part of the novel, which continues to add pieces to the smaller whole, Xavier and Goody leave Bangalore for Delhi, even though Xavier’s binge drinking has negatively affected their relationship. As the narrator reveals, “[s]he didn’t know it then but the burst of homemaking would be the end of Xavier’s active phase. Soon he was inert, uninterested in sex, work, or conversation. His explanation for inactivity was simple. He was settling into the city and the city was settling into him” (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 416). A few months later, their problems intensify:

When their life unravelled it did so in a matter of hours. At one moment they were co-dependents with a shared life and past; and then it ended as effectively as if someone had thrown a switch. She came home to find Dharini in a towel, freshly showered and smoking a cigarette. Her hair had frizzed in the heat. Xavier was apologetically pacing.

‘I know this is a bit sudden and all,’ he said. ‘But Dharini is here in Delhi and she doesn’t have a place. I wondered if, you know, she could stay with us for a bit?’

[...]

She said, ‘Dismas said Newton was missing me. So I emailed to Newton and came. He said you’d not mind. I hope it’s okay?’

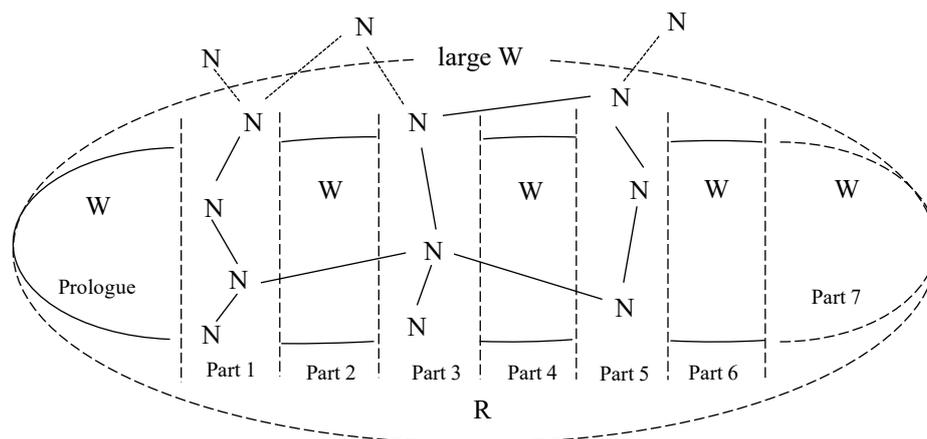
[...] He was in love. He was sorry to have to say so but he was in love with both of them; it could not be helped. (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 436)

In the evening, the three decide to go out for dinner together, and when Goody and Dharini return home the next morning after deliberately leaving Xavier alone at night, he has disappeared (cf. *The Book of Chocolate Saints* 440-43). In the first chapter of the seventh and last part of the novel, this incident is narrated from Xavier’s perspective: “But when he stepped in from the terrace he sensed that the apartment was empty. They were gone, both of them. Where? Had they left together without telling him? Had they left him together?” (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 447). Then, his friend Benny Time, a televangelist, calls him, inviting him to an event at a club and to a press conference the following day. However, the conference is rescheduled as they are informed that Johnny Star, a Christian singer working with Benny, has been abducted by three unknown men (cf. *The Book of Chocolate Saints* 448-56). Xavier afterwards wanders through the city, gets drunk and then notices that “[t]he pain or ache in his side had spread to his arm and there was a circle of pain tightening around his chest. He wondered if he was having a stroke” (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 459). The following chapter presents Dismas’s perspective; Dismas is reading from his book *The Loathed*, and “[t]he day after the Agra launch he was in one of the city’s few coffee shops when a picture of Xavier flashed on the television above the cash register. [...] Then he turned back to the screen and read the words scrolled across the bottom, X’IAN PAINTER NEWTON XAVIER

DISAPPEARED, FEARED DEAD” (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 463, emphasis in the original).

### Seemingly Completing the Wholes

The seventh and last part of the novel seemingly adds the last pieces to the heterodiegetic narrator’s small whole. However, even though the conventionally written part of the novel creates a sense of closure by depicting Xavier’s death and his final exhibition, the network, which also includes interviews that were conducted posthumously, implies that his story will, strictly speaking, never be complete. In fact, even the conventionally written part implies that others, such as Dismas, will continue to narrate stories about Xavier in the future and extend the novel’s network, even if Xavier might not agree with it.



When Dismas attends Xavier’s final exhibition at the National Gallery in New Delhi, he learns that the artist has died of a heart attack (cf. *The Book of Chocolate Saints* 468), and when he meets Goody later on, she addresses Xavier’s true opinion of him:

‘I understand something about you that I hadn’t understood before.’ She turned to face him. ‘You’re a critic. There’s no worse thing that can be said about a man. When your book appeared a journalist called him for a response. That’s how he heard the things you said about him, self-promoter, self-plagiarist, and so on. And the made-up controversy about Moraes and Kolatkar and Ezekiel: not a shred of evidence, hearsay held up as truth, but so many people took it seriously. He knew why you did it. Murder sells books. He said you were your own enemy and he forgave you. Who knows, in time I might too.’ (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 474)

When Dismas is later sitting in a taxi, he wonders “[w]hat was there to forgive? He had embellished a little and created a controversy out of coincidence. Compared to Xavier’s crimes his own were insignificant. She would forgive X but not him” (*The Book of Chocolate Saints*

474). This additionally shows that there is a clash of perspectives and that assessments of certain situations or other people are always subjective, as also reflected by the novel's network of interviews. When Dismas opens the envelope Goody has given him, he finds a poem written by Xavier in it:

**To Dis; or, Assertion of Provenance**

Dawg, just so you know, I didn't need the money.  
I lied, but bad X was running the show, stab-  
Stabbing for revenge. Well, good X forgives you,

Betrayer, though even he does not do it easily.  
O, Bambai, you are better than you know.  
May your base instinct expel itself like bad  
Blood and may you rise to shame, as I am un-  
Able to do; I sink daily, deeper into bad mud,  
Yea, verily I sink. Even so, I certify the Two  
Marys, signed *Xavier 96*, are comparatively  
Authentic, painted by the writer of this poeme,  
Newton, for Dis, retrospective acrostic dedicatee.

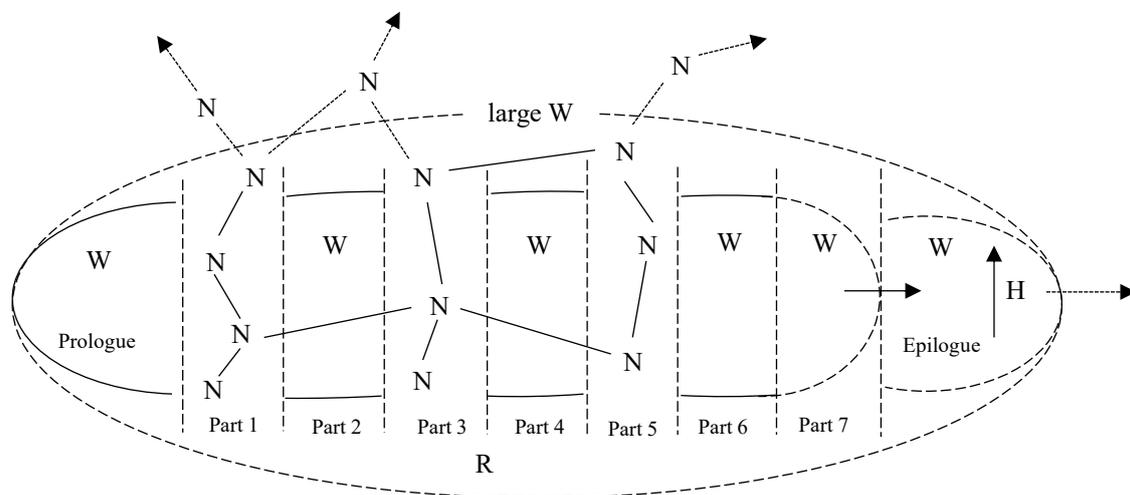
(*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 475)

Xavier is therefore once more given a voice in the form of a poem, providing his perspective and implying that he will always be able to speak in his written works, which have not died along with him. As Dismas notes at the end of the novel, "[...] he would publish *The Book of Chocolate Saints*, his oral history of Xavier, using a representative sample of X's poems. For that he would need Goody's permission. She had the rights to his estate. It was a reason for them to meet again" (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 476). He reveals that his second book will therefore add Xavier's voice (in the form of poems) to the already existing network of stories about him, which could potentially expand endlessly.

The novel's epilogue indicates that Goody's story will also expand beyond the confines of the text and potentially be told by other people. At the beginning of the epilogue, the narrator makes their presence felt, providing a glimpse into Goody's future and stressing the characters' powerlessness as their stories are told: "And now as I prepare the final pages let me leave you with a picture of Goody Lol in the future where all of us will eventually reside. Not the far future, not afloat in the great river of forgetfulness and oblivion. I will draw her for you in the apartment in Delhi where, not long ago, the rooms had been full of commotion, so full it seemed an army of ghosts must camp there" (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 477). Once more, the narrator makes their presence felt and tries to draw in the reader in an effort to create a sense of wholeness. Afterwards, the narrator becomes more covert as there is a switch to a heterodiegetic narration with internal focalisation through Goody:

It is only now that grieving begins. She had to put the perils of the past behind her; she had to give in. The giving in is the easiest thing in the world. And in the years to come she will feel she is finally past the grief, she has *moved on* as they say. Then all of a sudden grief will return, as fresh and red as ever. This morning she plays ‘Ave Maria’ at a low volume because she doesn’t want to wake the house. As always she comes out of the music heavier and more substantial if only to herself. As always she lights a cigarette and exhales slowly to watch the pictures in the smoke, to communicate with the dead. She is one by two; she has two brains, two pairs of lungs, and two sets of genitals. She has two hearts. (*The Book of Chocolate Saints* 478-79, emphasis in the original)

The narrator first draws in the reader and then seems to disappear, conveying the impression that they have completed the smaller whole together and that there is nothing else to add, which once more emphasises the narrative hierarchy the narrator has established during the conventionally written parts of the novel. However, this final passage of the novel also reveals how difficult it is for Goody to cope with Xavier’s death and to move on in life. It also implies that she will never be able to fully get over her loss in the future as she clings to Xavier, even if only in the form of a ghost. Just like the network of interviews, the epilogue therefore indicates that the sense of wholeness the narrator has tried to create in the conventionally written parts of the novel is, in fact, an illusion; Goody’s life story will expand into the future, just like the stories that have and will be told about Xavier.



#### 4.2 Unexpectedly Crossing Paths: Anuradha Roy’s *Sleeping on Jupiter*

Born in Calcutta in 1967, Anuradha Roy works as a journalist, has published four novels so far and won many literary prizes. Her debut novel, *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* (2008), which

has been translated into several languages, tells “the story of three generations of a Bengali family whose disintegrating houses speak of their faltering ambitions and fortunes [...]” (Armitstead n.p.). As Tabish Khair notes in a review of Roy’s second novel, *The Folded Earth* (2011), which has won the Economist Crossword Book Award, “Roy’s talent lies in her ability to infuse hard bits of social and political reality into a narrative that would otherwise have assumed the soft tinctures of light reading” (n.p.). *Sleeping on Jupiter*, her third novel, which was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize and won the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature, followed in 2015, and her latest one, *All the Lives We Never Lived*, in 2018. Just like her debut novel, it “is set against the tumultuous history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as India is dragged into a war that is not of its making and then abruptly liberated of colonial rule to make what it can of independence” (Armitstead n.p.).

### ***Sleeping on Jupiter: An Overview of Content and Form***

*Sleeping on Jupiter*, set in present-day India, tells the story of Nomi, a twenty-five-year old woman who is on her way from Norway to her Indian home town to work on a documentary with her colleague, Suraj, and to find out more about her painful past. On the train to Jarmuli, she encounters three elderly women, Latika, Vidya and Gouri, who have the same destination and intend to spend a holiday in the temple town. When the three women visit the famous Vishnu temple there, it turns out that their tourist guide, Badal, has secretly fallen in love with Raghu, a boy working in a tea stall owned by Johnny Toppo on the beach. Additionally, the narrative is interspersed with flashbacks of Nomi’s traumatic childhood; after losing her family in a war, she is forced to live in an ashram, where she and the other girls are abused on a regular basis, until she manages to escape one day and is sent to a foster mother in Europe. The narrative extends over the course of five days, alternating between scenes focusing on the three elderly women, Nomi’s work with Suraj, her childhood memories, and Badal’s attempts to win over Raghu. Even though these four narrative strands keep intersecting with each other in the course of the novel, they must also be understood as separate entities, revealing the struggles of each of the individuals. As Annie Zaidi remarks in her review, “[t]he novel’s major asset is its restraint. Not every character is fleshed out to the degree that the reader may identify with him/her deeply, and yet, each one is sufficiently illustrated to reveal their separate aches, anxieties and vulnerabilities” (“Book Review” n.p.). Hence, even though Nomi is the novel’s protagonist, the narrative does not exclusively focus on her but also depicts pieces of the stories of the other characters she encounters during her journey.

Structurally speaking, the novel is divided into five main parts, focusing on the five days the characters spend in Jarmuli; these five parts are further divided into several short chapters, telling the characters' stories in an episodic fashion. This main section is preceded by a prologue with the title *Before the First Day*, which starts telling Nomi's background story, and followed by a short epilogue, called *The Eighteenth Day*, also focusing on Nomi after her return to Norway. As Sun Yung Shin notes in her review of the novel, "Roy's passages are not hot-house atmospheric but cinematic, moving from crisp narration [...] to lyrical passages that communicate the kinetic urgency of a character's outer and inner journeys [...]" (n.p.). The four narrative strands repeatedly intersect with each other during the five main parts, revealing coincidences and unexpected connections between the characters' seemingly separate stories as well as creating an impression of simultaneity due to several switches between the stories within one day. These observations are emphasised by the fact that the switches between the different characters do not follow a specific pattern or a regular rhythm. Hence, the novel constructs, and reflects upon, the way in which the lives of individuals may intersect with each other in real-life situations. The novel's four narrative strands must therefore be understood as four separate entities, or (incomplete) wholes, each of which is split up into multiple pieces; these pieces are arranged into one large and loosely connected horizontal network, characterised by potentially unexpected connections as the characters' paths start crossing, and by the absence of any discernible rhythm. Zaidi also points out in this context that "[t]he novel captures a particular moment in time when the lives of all these characters intersect, and a minor action on the part of one sets off a chain of events that pushes the others into a crisis they may not survive. There is a lot of switching of voices and perspectives throughout the narrative" ("Book Review" n.p.). The fact that all of the separate parts of the novel are told by a heterodiegetic narrator with internal focalisation through the different characters underlines the impression of a network structure, whose elements are arranged in horizontal rather than vertical order and defy a clear narrative hierarchy in favour of a specific character. As Chelsea Leigh Horne observes in her review, "[t]he novel unfolds through various perspectives interspersed with the now-adult Nomi's flashbacks to her childhood in the ashram" (n.p.). The fact that the novel is interspersed with memories of Nomi's childhood further implies that even though these incidents lie in the past, they affect her life in the present and therefore also become part of the novel's network. Additionally, as none of the four narrative strands achieve a sense of closure at the end of the novel, the four wholes remain incomplete, conveying the impression that the network will expand beyond the confines of the text and hence expose the artificiality of closure in conventionally written narratives.

### Starting the First Whole: The Three Women's Journey

The opening passage of *The First Day* introduces the novel's first narrative strand that takes place in the present, depicting the three women's train journey to Jarmuli. The first passage of this part must therefore be understood as the first piece of the whole that focuses on the three women. As the heterodiegetic narrator reveals at the very beginning of this part of the novel,

[a]t four in the afternoon, the sleeper train to Jarmuli shuddered to life and wheezed out of the station. Passengers locked into companionship for the next fourteen hours eyed each other sidelong, wondering how it would be. In Coach A2, three women were exchanging glances. 'You ask her,' Gouri's imploring look said to Latika and Vidya. Their eyes refused to meet hers. The three of them, friends, were going on their first outing together. They were in a compartment, all grey and blue, with two large plate-glass windows and four berths. To climb to one of the upper berths you needed to be agile. Gouri, whose ticket number pointed her upwards, could just about manage stairs these days if she placed her weight on the right knee instead of the left. She turned to the fourth person in their compartment and said, 'Excuse me, if you don't mind...' (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 21)

Gouri intends to ask a young woman, the fourth person in their compartment, whether she is willing to exchange berths with her. The passage is narrated with internal focalisation through the three women, who closely observe the foreign-looking girl: "The girl wore a turquoise T-shirt over which the words 'Been There Done That Binned It' undulated as though travelling over hills and valleys. Her pants were cut off at the calves and the fabric was held together with a dozen zips that traversed the legs. The women glimpsed tattoos and could not be sure if the glint at her eyebrows came from a stud" (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 22). When the girl responds that she does not mind sleeping in the upper berth, the three women try to engage in a conversation with her:

'[...] My name's Gouri, by the way, and this is Vidya. And you?'

'Nomi,' the girl said, her smile fading at Gouri's cascade of information. 'Pleased to meet you.' She fiddled with her earphones.

'Are you going on a holiday to Jarmuli?' This time the question came from Vidya, who looked at the girl over the rim of her glasses. 'Where are you from?'

'From...I'm from lots of places. Mostly Oslo, I guess,' the girl said. 'Not a holiday. I'm here to...to research a documentary.' Even as Vidya started saying, documentary about what, she added, 'On religious tourism, temple towns, all of that. My boss wanted the Kumbh. Took some doing, but I persuaded her Jarmuli might work.' (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 23)

Even though the girl is rather unwilling to participate in the conversation, the three women keep asking her questions. When the train later stops at a station for a longer period of time, Nomi

decides to get off to buy some food, with the three women fearing that the train might leave without her:

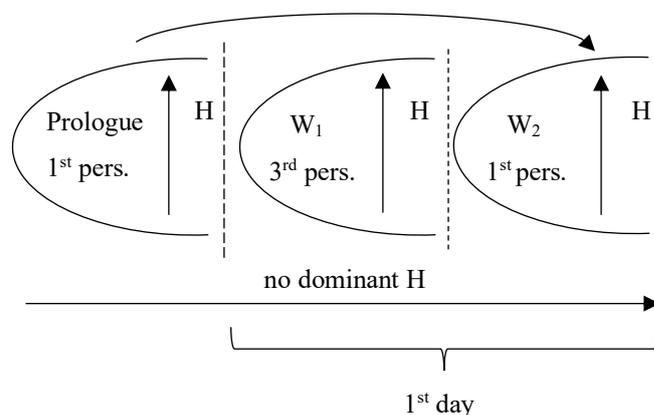
The girl went towards the stall, jostled by crowds. Everyone was pushing at each other to get on the train or buy food at the stall before the train left. She was surrounded by men ogling her braided hair and ringed ears and the curves outlined in turquoise by her T-shirt. Inside the train, the women were shielded from all the noise and shouting on the platform, but they could see her lips move. [...] The man reached out, took her money, gave her a long look, plucked a packet of bread rolls from his rack and handed it to her. Then a plastic cup of tea.

‘Why doesn’t she come back?’ Vidya said. ‘She’s got what she wanted, hasn’t she?’ I should never have let her go. A foreign child!’ (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 32)

When the train finally moves on, the three women are unsure whether the girl has managed to return in time. Therefore, “[t]he three of them sat motionless, their holiday high spirits snuffed out by the absence of a girl they knew not at all” (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 34). Unable to forget the incident, “[t]hey got off at Jarmuli’s station, saying nothing to one another, each of them searching the busy platform for a glimpse of coloured braids and turquoise” (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 35). The scene ends with this observation, indicating that the three women are clearly upset by the absence of the unknown girl as they do not manage to catch a glimpse of her after their arrival.

### The Prologue and the Second Whole: Nomi’s Traumatic Past

The following passage employs a homodiegetic narrator, continuing the story about Nomi from the prologue, *Before the First Day*, preceding the train journey. Such structural breaks and switches between passages of first- and third-person narration, focusing on several different characters, may surprise the reader, who is initially unable to detect possible connections between the various loose narrative strands, or pieces of the separate wholes.



In the prologue, Nomi first outlines some of the most painful moments of her childhood:

The year the war came closer I was six or seven and it did not matter to me. [...] When the pigs were slaughtered for their meat they shrieked with a sound that made my teeth fall off and this was the sound I heard soon after my mother cut the grapefruit, and the men came in with axes. Their faces were wrapped in cloth. They shoved my brother outside, they pushed my mother and me to a corner of the room and then they flung my father at a wall. They slammed his face at the wall again and again. The whitewashed wall streamed red, they threw him to the floor and kicked him with their booted feet. Each time the boots hit him it was as if a limp bundle of clothes was being tossed this way and that. One of the men lifted an axe and brought it down on my father's forehead. When they left they wrote something on the wall in his blood. They did not look at us. (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 11-12)

Nomi adds that her mother then ran into the forest with her, abandoned her in a place close to the sea and never came back. In the evening, two women picked her up and took her to a shelter before she was taken to an ashram a few weeks later (cf. *Sleeping on Jupiter* 12-17). This first-person narration continues after the scene on the train; even though it is therefore also part of the section *The First Day*, it is clear that the horrible incidents took place a long time ago. However, the fact that the following traumatic scenes are inserted into the main narrative taking place in the present indicates that they keep haunting Nomi:

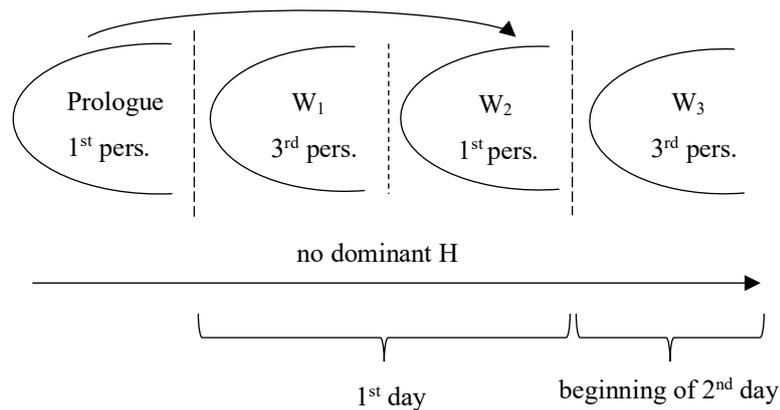
There is a dream I often have. I am a baby in it, held aloft by a man. He is on his back on a bed, his legs are bent at the knee, he is holding me high above him, my face is above his face, his hands are under my arms, and he is rocking on his back until he almost somersaults. [...] I want to beg him to stop, but my voice has died and I can't say a word. I wake up soaked in sweat. I knew that the place where I had grown up was near Jarmuli. Although I had left the place as a child, I thought it would all come back. I got off at the station in Jarmuli and on my way to the hotel I devoured the landscape and buildings as if they would fill me with memories. Nothing happened. (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 36)

Nomi has travelled to Jarmuli to investigate her past and to figure out what has happened to her family. As Srijani Ganguly also adds in her review, “[i]n *Sleeping on Jupiter*, the one whose existence is most troubling is Nomi. Years ago, after witnessing a horrible tragedy in her village and facing abuse in an ashram, she was adopted into Norway. But, her past still haunts her” (n.p.). Even though the dark scenes of Nomi's childhood form a separate entity as they lie in the past, they are scattered throughout the narrative and therefore integrated into the network the multiple pieces of the other three stories or wholes taking place in the present are arranged into, demonstrating, on a structural level, that the painful memories keep haunting Nomi and that her past is therefore as present as ever. In the following, Nomi narrates how she arrived at the ashram, revealing her first impressions of the unfamiliar place: “The room had many pictures of a long-haired man. There was one that covered most of the wall on one side. It was much taller than any of us. I could not look away from it because his eyes in that picture seemed

to follow me around” (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 37). Nomi further describes her first encounter with Guruji as follows: “Guruji patted his lap to make me climb on to it. Then he held me against him. His chest was warm and bare, and I could hear his heart beat. ‘You think you have nobody,’ his voice said over my head, and I could feel its vibration enter my body. ‘That is not true. I am your father and your mother now. I am your country. I am your teacher. I am your God’” (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 38-39). As Horne adds in this context, “[a]t this sanctuary, where she and other children orphaned by war are protected and hidden, many adore Guruji, the ashram’s leader, who appears to be someone larger than life, mystical, god-like, and particularly loving toward the young girls under his care” (n.p.). However, it later turns out that this seemingly mystical and god-like figure abuses the girls on a regular basis, leaving them traumatised for the rest of their lives.

### The Third Whole: Badal, the Temple Guide

After this passage about Nomi’s memories of Guruji and her arrival at the ashram, the following part of the novel, *The Second Day*, introduces yet another character, Badal, a temple guide in Jarmuli. Once more, this structural break and switch to an unknown character might surprise the reader and raise questions about the links between the various narrative strands, or wholes, which so far appear to be completely independent.

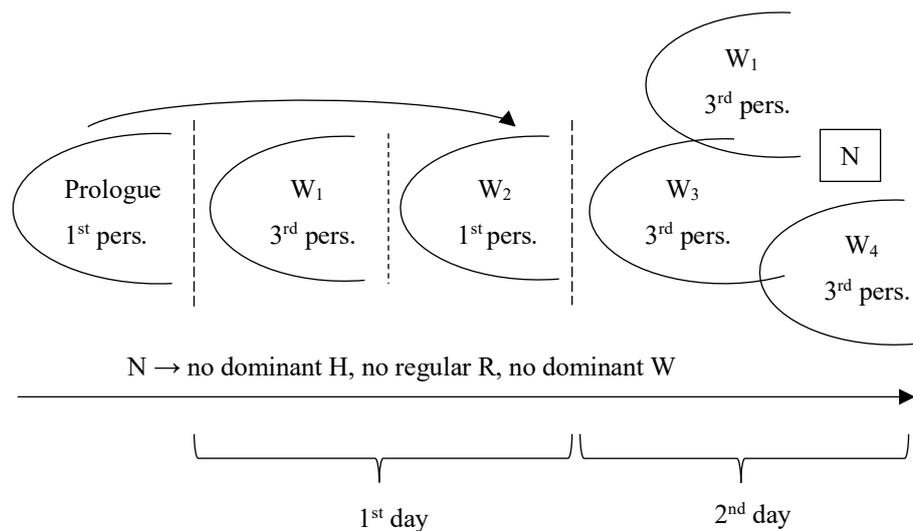


This break is accompanied by a switch back to a heterodiegetic narrator, who introduces Badal as follows: “Badal sat cross-legged in a padmasana, knees jutting out, meditating fingertips pressed together. His back was as straight as the wall behind him. His lips flickered, but his eyelids were sealed” (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 49). The passage focusing on Badal must be understood as the first piece of another separate whole. However, on the following page, it

becomes clear that there is, in fact, a connection with the story of the three women: “The more he tried to extricate himself from the quicksand of life, the more relentlessly it sucked him in. What was his work today? There were the errands for his uncle. Nothing else. It would be slow. And in the evening? He grimaced. ‘Three old biddies from Calcutta,’ the hotel had said, when booking him to take them around the Vishnu temple” (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 50). Hence, it becomes clear that this seemingly independent story about Badal is, in fact, loosely connected to the previous narrative strand about the three women on the train. Before he picks them up in the evening, he decides to go to the beach, introducing two more characters, Johnny Toppo, the owner of a tea stall at the beach, and Raghu, Johnny’s employee. As reviewer Manil Suri points out in this respect, “[r]ounding out the socioeconomic scale are Badal, the temple guide, who has developed an all-consuming crush on the tea boy Raghu, and Raghu’s employer, the enigmatic tea seller, who may or may not be a figure from Nomi’s past” (n.p.). Having arrived, “Badal scanned the beach in either direction, shading his eyes. It was a while before he spotted Raghu, not far away, to the left. There he was, on one of the concrete plinths by the beach, facing the sun, body stretched: sinking and rising, arching and drooping, as gracefully as if it were a dance, into stretches and push-ups. [A] [s]culpture that had stepped off the walls of a temple. Badal stood motionless, his eyes fixed on the boy” (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 53). As Badal’s narrative strand continues, it turns out that he is not only a minor character whose sole purpose is to take the three women to the temple but that he has his own story to tell within his own whole.

#### **The Fourth Whole and Intersecting Paths: Nomi and Suraj at the Temple**

When Badal later arrives at the temple, pieces of his whole also overlap with those of Nomi’s, who is now accompanied by her colleague, Suraj, thus creating another unexpected connection in the novel’s network of scenes.



The passage further focuses on how the characters perceive each other, drawing attention to the fact that there is no objective way of describing other people or of telling their stories. After examining her closely, Badal is forced to tell Nomi and her colleague that they are not allowed to enter the temple due to Nomi's inappropriate appearance:

Badal turned away from her tentative smile. How was he to put this to her? He took the man [Suraj] aside.

'She can't go in like that.'

The man seemed not to understand.

Badal switched from Hindi to English and enunciated the words: 'Clothes. Not good.' He gave the girl a rapid look, turned away as if embarrassed. How could she have come to a temple looking like that? Didn't every guide book make it clear how women must dress for this temple? Nothing shorter than ankle-length, no tight clothes, everyone knew that. (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 56-57)

The scene emphasises Nomi's status as an outsider in her home country, which Horne also notes in her review: "Here, at a place that was once home, Nomi finds herself now out of place, both belonging and not belonging. Even her physical presence seems to be at odds with the setting [...]" (n.p.). Additionally, Nomi and Suraj's part of the story is not only told with internal focalisation through themselves but also from the perspectives of characters that do not know them well, implying that there is not only one objective way of telling somebody's story. Suraj himself also provides an insight into his thoughts on Nomi after seeing her for the first time: "From the self-assurance of her e-mails he had built up an image of a tall, athletic, and he had to admit it – white – woman in his head. A sensuous blonde. Along the lines of Anita Ekberg or Britt Ekland, a Scandinavian Valkyrie ready for anything" (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 60). However, as Suraj further reveals, "[t]hen yesterday, in the hotel's reception, there was this – this brown shrimp. He had looked past her, beyond her, around her, not wanting to believe that

this was the woman he had been writing to. His boss for the next few days. Unbelievable. Just when he thought his luck had turned” (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 60). As Kandasamy adds in this respect, “Roy’s chiselled prose allows her to expose the endless, treacherous hypocrisies of Indian society: bare-bodied priests who make a fuss about women’s clothing; tourism that celebrates erotic carvings on temple walls while remaining in denial about the sexual abuse of children; holidaying old women tired of domestic drudgery who jump at the first opportunity to pass harsh judgment on each other and everyone else” (n.p.). This critique of Indian hypocrisies is particularly voiced in passages of internal focalisation through characters such as Badal and Suraj, who judge Nomi by her appearance and consider her way of dressing indecent but have overstepped boundaries themselves; Badal is trying to seduce Raghu, and Suraj is later haunted by a memory of a violent confrontation with his wife. Additionally, the circumstance that Nomi, the novel’s main protagonist, is often viewed through the eyes of the various characters she meets during her journey draws attention to the fact that different people may perceive others in different ways and therefore also tell subjective stories about them. This is emphasised by the fact that the novel employs various different focalisers instead of one dominant one whose perspective the narrator could present in a seemingly objective and linear fashion throughout the entire narrative, an impossible scenario in real-life situations.

### **Connecting the First and the Third Whole**

In the following, another piece is added to Badal’s whole, which finally intersects with that of the three women, indicating that humans do not exist in isolation and that their paths regularly cross, forming a large network that may expand in various directions and create unexpected connections. After having received five hundred rupees from Suraj for the temple tour, Badal leaves to search for Raghu, admitting that his “days now existed for the mornings and afternoons when he could escape clients, family, customers, priests, God himself – and run to the beach to sit holding a clay cup of Raghu’s tea – just sit with his voice within hearing, his body within touching distance” (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 67). In fact, he finds it hard to focus on anything else: “He wandered the beach that afternoon for longer than he knew, half expecting Raghu to return, running his tongue’s tip over his lips at times. Where had he run off to? How had the boy vanished from a beach so empty?” (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 69). He is so obsessed with these thoughts and endeavour to find the boy that afternoon that “[i]t was almost four by the time he snapped out of his stupor and remembered that he needed to get home, wash himself, change his clothes – all that to be done before he went to meet the Calcutta group at their hotel”

(*Sleeping on Jupiter* 69). The fact that Badal's story finally overlaps with that of the three women demonstrates that the characters' seemingly separate wholes are actually split up into various pieces that are then arranged into a horizontally structured network and can be connected in unexpected ways. Before their paths eventually cross, the following chapter switches to the three women, revealing that "[e]ven as he was walking home, Badal's clients were resting in their hotel, readying themselves for the long evening ahead at the great temple. Gouri, however, could not lie still for thinking she had forgotten something. She turned her three bags inside out. She sat down on her bed, now strewn with her things, and wondered – what was she searching for?" (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 73). After a passage about Nomi's experiences in the ashram, the focus is back on Badal, who is finally on his way to pick up the three women from the hotel. As the narrator reveals in a passage of internal focalisation through Badal, "[t]he three women were already outside, scanning the road for him. He was not late in the end, but they made him feel as if he was. He parked his scooter, taking a long time to lock it even though he knew he would be setting off on it again in a few minutes" (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 96). When they arrive at the temple, "[t]he women walked barefoot on bricked paths and dirt tracks, buffeted by other pilgrims who pushed past them to get ahead. Inside the shrines the stone floors were so slippery with grease and water that they had to edge along the walls, holding them for support" (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 98). This arrangement of scenes with alternating foci on Badal and the three women further evokes a sense of simultaneity, indicating that various actions may be carried out simultaneously in different places until the protagonists' paths finally cross.

### **Exploring the Relationship between the Past and the Present**

This impression of simultaneity is also emphasised by the fact that the scene in which the three women prepare for their trip to the temple is not immediately followed by the scene in which Badal arrives to pick them up. Instead, the narrator first presents several pieces of Nomi's whole, demonstrating once more that several actions may take place simultaneously during the same day and that, additionally, the past is never fully absent either. The same day Badal is searching for Raghu at the beach and later prepares for the tour with the three women, Nomi spends her free time at Johnny's tea stall: "That afternoon, Nomi stood by Johnny Toppo's stall drinking tea. There were no other customers yet, it was too early. They would come when the sun turned the waves into that molten copper he could not take his eyes off though he saw it every day" (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 78). Once more, Nomi is closely observed by another character:

“Johnny Toppo looked the girl up and down – young, thin, with coloured threads in her hair, rings in her ears: to look at, like one of those starving hippies who reeked of old sweat, but this one smelled fresh and clean. One of her arms was covered in fine, shiny sand and she had a big camera hanging from her neck” (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 78). However, when Johnny later starts singing a song and Nomi is reminded of one of her friends from the ashram, Piku, the situation is reversed and the scene is focalised through Nomi:

Nomi closed her eyes tight when he sang. It was unbearable. She wanted him to stop singing. At the same time she wanted him to sing this very same song forever. They would live in a hut and have hens and pigs and grow yam and bananas and play in the stream nearby, she had promised. Piku used to light up whenever she started talking about the hut, so Nomi had added more and more detail each day: new plants, new animals, new things they would do. That was the game, dreaming together. After the lights were put out Piku crept across the dormitory and snuggled up to her in her narrow bunk. Nomi would sleep comforted by the sense of her breathing, her movements in the night. By dawn she was always gone. (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 80)

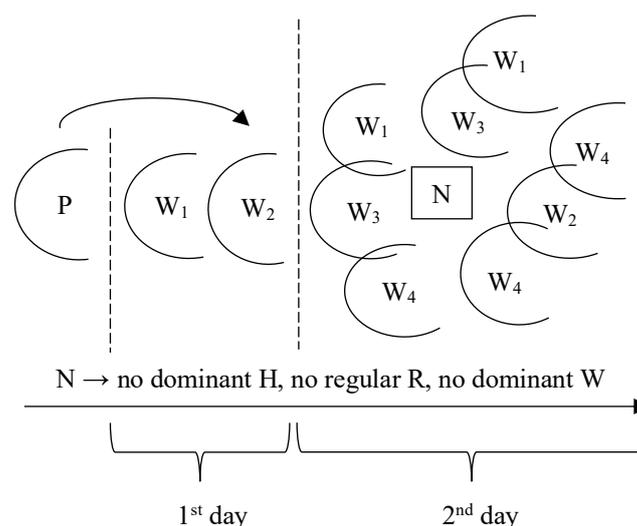
As reviewer Rebecca K. Morrison points out in her review, “[t]he tea-seller by the beach, Johnny Toppo, acts as the unwitting point of connection between the [...] characters, each drinking his chai and allowing its taste and his songs to unlock memories and daydreams” (n.p.). The fact that Nomi is reminded of a scene from her childhood, which is triggered by Johnny’s song in the present moment, indicates that the past is not an entirely separate entity that has no effects on the present; instead, her past keeps haunting Nomi wherever she goes. This is emphasised by the fact that the memory is this time narrated by a third-person narrator, whereas the other passages about her childhood are told in the first person and thus indicate both a clearer separation from the present and a greater sense of control of the experiencer. This structural arrangement and employment of different narrators demonstrates that the past is, on the one hand, a separate entity, and, on the other hand, a force that has immediate effects on the present and may overwhelm people in unexpected situations. Additionally, the passages that are narrated in the first person are always clearly set apart from the passages that take place in the present. For instance, the scene focusing on the afternoon Nomi spends at Johnny’s tea stall ends with the observation that “[s]he closed her eyes, opened them again, saw that the sun had gone and the sea had turned to foaming blood” (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 84). The following scene, which starts on the next page and is therefore clearly set apart from the moment taking place in the present, switches back to the first-person report of Nomi’s experiences in the ashram and relationship to her foster mother:

When I was eight I was given duties in the ashram, like the other boat girls. My new work was to help in the gardens. I knew nothing about plants and I was born clumsy. I

would step on one plant when trying to reach another. I would uproot freshly-planted seedlings when weeding. Gradually I became better at it and in time it would become the only bond between me and my foster mother. I don't know why I became a sullen, monosyllabic lump around her. She persisted in being friendly, but her efforts only oppressed me. (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 85)

The passage also reveals that Nomi and several other girls got abused by Guruji: “As his hand moved from scar to scar, it went under the skirt of my tunic and began to stroke the part between my legs. His hand went up my thighs and down. He shifted my weight and slipped down my knickers and put his hand right between my legs. He lifted his own robes and he pulled my hand towards himself and said, ‘Hold this, it is magic.’ It stuck out from between his legs like a stump” (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 94). Hence, while the memories that are triggered by moments in the present and narrated by a third-person narrator are integrated into the whole focusing on Nomi, the passages of first-person memories form an independent whole which is also part of the larger network that incorporates all of the pieces of the separate wholes that unfold during the novel. Thus, the memories written in the third person are more closely linked to the other passages about Nomi's present life than those written in the first person. This arrangement emphasises the circumstance that the past is both a separate entity that cannot be changed anymore and a force that still affects Nomi in the present.

A later passage that switches back to Suraj adds another piece to the whole surrounding him and Nomi by providing a deeper insight into Suraj's past.



As the narrator reveals with internal focalisation through him, “[h]aving left the temple and shaken off Badal that afternoon, Suraj had eaten his crab curry and rice, then fallen asleep immediately afterwards in a heat and hangover-induced daze. By the time he woke it was dark. He had not met Nomi after she had driven off, leaving him stranded at the temple gates”

(*Sleeping on Jupiter* 105). In this passage, the narrator also reveals details about the situation between Suraj and his wife, Ayesha, indicating that he is also haunted by memories of the past:

Suraj tossed his rucksack to a corner and fell back into the mound of pillows on his bed. That last terrible evening of his marriage with Ayesha. It was five months to the day – an anniversary of sorts! The recollection sent a stab of pain to his chest. [...] Suraj lay inert, hardly daring to breathe, trying to take his mind off that evening five months ago. He had relived it almost every hour. The minute he allowed his mind to wander he was back in their rented house in Delhi, its enclosed courtyard lined with dessicated potted palms and straggly jasmine. [...] Suraj knew only that he wanted to kill, smash the world into fragments. The dog looked for a way out, but it was too frightened to find the gap in the fencing through which it had come in. [...] He hit it harder and harder as if he needed to grind the animal into bonemeal. At some point, he became aware of his wife screaming. She threw herself against him and he pushed her away so savagely that she fell. That made him drop the bat. And then the only sounds were his panting, his wife sobbing, and low whimpers from the dog, a mess of broken bones held together by bloodied fur. Ayesha had left the next day. (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 106-107)

Just like Nomi, Suraj is consumed by his thoughts about traumatic incidents of the past. When Nomi later joins him, she does not only mention the three women from the train, indicating that she is still thinking about them as well, but also alludes to the fact that her painful memories are a heavy burden:

‘I didn’t go back to my coach on that train,’ she said. ‘I wonder what happened to those women. They must be here somewhere, no? Maybe next door. Maybe the fat one is drifting around in the maze inside that temple, lost forever. Maybe she’ll forget to go back to her family. She’ll turn into a holy woman. Years later her awful children will come here and fall at her feet.’

She spoke faster and faster, riveted by the scenario she was conjuring up. ‘Don’t you wish it could happen? Your mind wiped clean, like a hard drive? Start again without memories?’

Thinking of the day of the dog, he knew he would like his mind scoured spotless. He thought of his wife with her new man – his old friend. (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 113-14)

It becomes clear that both of them struggle with memories of their past, wishing that certain incidents had never taken place. Additionally, Nomi emphasises the fact that she is still thinking about the three women from the train, indicating that even though they struggle with their individual experiences from the past, all of the characters are part of the novel’s large network that may accidentally connect them and make their paths cross. This circumstance is also emphasised by the fact that the following scene provides an overview of where the characters spend the night after the second day in Jarmuli:

On a nearby rooftop, Johnny Toppo lay with his bundle of clothes as a pillow, gazing at the bloodshot sky. His money was in that bundle too. In his head he counted the notes. Ninety-six rupees. Not enough, but something. [...] Badal lay on his string cot in his stuffy room alternately opening and shutting the mobile he had bought for Raghu. [...]

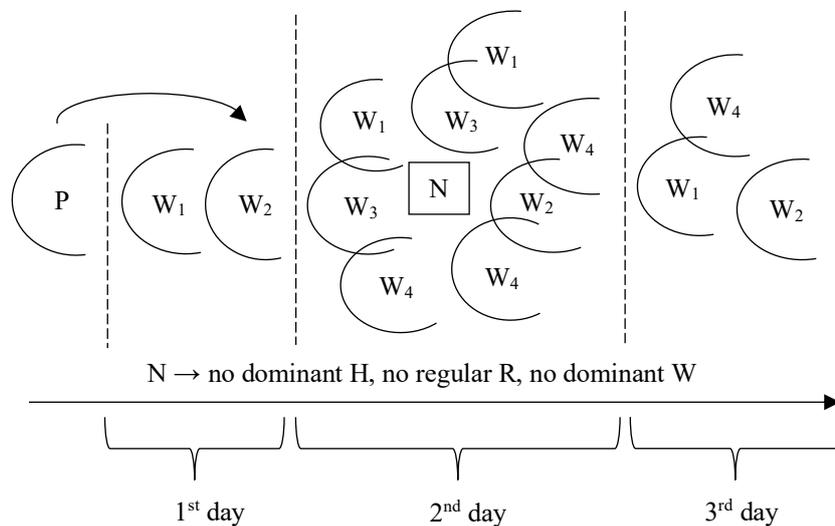
At the Swirling Sea Hotel, Latika slept, tense with anxiety, dreaming of herself tonguetied on a spotlit stage. She had forgotten the song she was meant to sing or the reason for being on that stage. Down the corridor, Gouri lay awake holding a photograph of her dead husband, as she did every night, telling him all the things she could not share with anyone else. Between their rooms and the luxury hotel next door was a shallow creek choked with rubbish, covered in reeds and gloom. Nomi lay in a large double bed in the hotel across the creek. She had fenced herself in on every side with pillows, her backpack, her travel guide, extra blankets rolled into barrels. (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 115-16)

### **More Unexpected Connections within the Network**

The following part of the novel, *The Third Day*, reveals two unexpected connections between the characters' wholes, indicating that life may be full of coincidences and, due to limited perspectives, never fully predictable. The beginning of this third part of the novel switches back to the three women, revealing that "Vidya threw up in the early hours and lay in bed till late morning. Her head was spinning, her temples ached, her neck hurt" (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 127). As Vidya feels unwell, Gouri and Latika decide to go to the beach on their own. As all of the other characters of the novel, they end up at Johnny's tea stall, where they meet Badal again (cf. *Sleeping on Jupiter* 129-30). As Horne adds in this respect, "somehow, unknowingly, these characters find their way to Johnny Toppo's tea stall, a geographical and emotional center of the story" (n.p.). However, at this point, their paths do not only intersect with those of Johnny and Badal but also with those of two other characters: "It was when they were drinking their second cups of tea that Latika tugged at Gouri's hand and whispered, 'Isn't he...?' For a while, Gouri couldn't tell what Latika had seen. 'Who are you talking about?' And at that moment, she saw. It was Vidya's son, Suraj, idling at one of the stands. With a girl" (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 133). When they notice that the woman who accompanies Suraj is not his wife but in fact the girl from the train to Jarmuli, they are shocked and decide to keep the secret to themselves (cf. *Sleeping on Jupiter* 133-35). Hence, the collision of two pieces of separate wholes creates a new, and to the reader surprising, connection in the network at this point. This demonstrates that it is, due to limited perspectives, never possible to see all of the connections that might potentially exist between seemingly separate paths at first sight, indicating that life is never fully predictable and may confront people with unpleasant coincidences.

The fairly short section *The Third Day* is completed by a continuation of Nomi's first-person narrative, which prepares the reader for another potentially unexpected connection that will be revealed in the following part of the novel. This time, Nomi's narration mostly focuses on her relationship with Jugnu, the gardener she worked with at the ashram. Jugnu is one of the

few people Nomi had a good relationship with during her time there, as she reveals in the following: “He was the only person at the ashram who gave me things: flowers, fruits, oddly-coloured dry leaves, dead butterflies, flattened frogs, striped stones: these were his notion of presents for a girl” (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 138). Afterwards, she adds the following about Jugnu: “I was wary of the other people at the ashram but never of Jugnu. He talked to me as if we were the same age. He made me feel grown-up and clever. He told me stories. He said that before he became a gardener he used to draw pictures for story-books” (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 139). The two pieces, the one about Latika and Gouri at the beach, and the one about Jugnu in the ashram, which are the only constituents of *The Third Day*, are unrelated, but both allude to unexpected connections that might be important for the further development of the novel’s network.

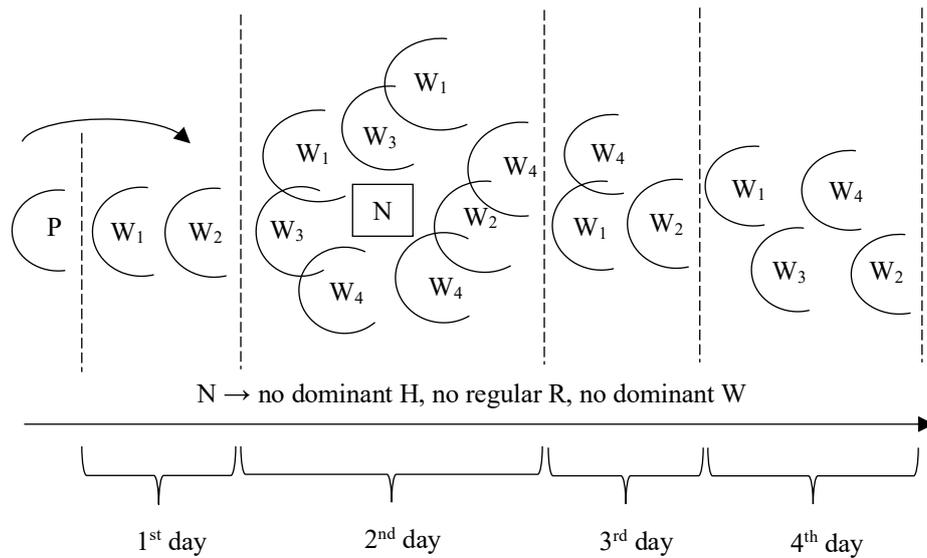


The unexpected connection involving Jugnu is revealed in the course of *The Fourth Day*. The first scene of this fourth part initially switches back to Vidya and Latika in the hotel room as they notice that Gouri has disappeared, but, luckily, they find her shortly afterwards at the beach (cf. *Sleeping on Jupiter* 149-53). After another scene focusing on Badal (cf. *Sleeping on Jupiter* 153-57), the narrator switches back to Nomi, who is once more at Johnny’s tea stall. At this point, it turns out that there might be an unexpected connection between Johnny and Nomi: “She took a deep breath of the tea in the pan and said, ‘Sometimes I feel I’ve seen you before. Don’t you feel sometimes...as if you’ve seen someone before, been somewhere before?’” (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 158-59). His response is rather evasive: “‘I don’t think too much, or feel too much.’ Johnny Toppo poured out her tea. ‘If you think too hard you just get a headache and lose your hair. And I don’t have any hair to lose, see?’” (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 159). Despite his apparent evasiveness, Nomi keeps asking him questions: “You sing so often of trees and flowers and paddy fields. Are you a farmer or a gardener?” (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 159). She

further asks him whether he knows about an ashram in Jarmuli, whereupon Johnny replies that “[t]here are hundreds of ashrams here, this is a temple town. All you hear is the sea and bells” (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 160). When Nomi is later alone, she cannot stop thinking about Johnny:

Johnny Toppo had not wanted to help her. She had been overtaken by a staggering sense of recognition, of joy – he was not dead after all, he was alive and she had found him! But he had spat at her and turned away. She could handle that, she would feel nothing, she was used to having doors slammed in her face. And I might be wrong, she told herself, many men have scars on their necks and everyone asks for morals of stories. What makes me so sure it was him? A memory she thought she had lost came back to her, its every feature sharp: Jugnu unloading the manure truck at the ashram. (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 163)

Even though she has not received any further hints from Johnny, who might possibly be Jugnu from the ashram, Nomi is eager to explore the city, hoping to find the place where she had to spend her childhood. She is eventually successful when she and the driver who accompanies her reach a desolate place “somewhere on the Kanakot-Jarmuli highway” (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 164). The passage is narrated through the eyes of the driver, who seems to be confused during their walk through the garden as “[t]he girl hunched before the trees, her arms wrapped around herself, holding her own body in an embrace” (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 166). In the following passage, it becomes clear that Nomi seems to recognise the desolate place: “‘It looked big from outside, but inside it’s not so big,’ the driver ventured. ‘I think there’s no more to see.’ The girl was unstable, he was sure, and the oddness of her interest in the ruin was unnerving him now. She murmured, ‘It isn’t. I always told Piku it was too far for her to walk to the gates. It wasn’t’” (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 166). Additionally, “[t]he girl bent and prised out from the ground something barely visible to the driver – a rusted metal cross, he saw, once she had rubbed the earth away from it with her fingers, with an arrow on one of its arms. It was rubbish, yet she held on to it, swiveled the arms this way and that” (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 167). Since it is already getting dark, the driver urges her to leave the place and to drive back into the city. *The Fourth Day* ends with a continuation of Nomi’s first-person narrative, mostly focusing on her friend Piku, who got, due to a disability, bullied by the other girls in the ashram, and on Jugnu (cf. *Sleeping on Jupiter* 171-76). Even though the place she grew up in is by now closed down, Nomi has been able to find it and might be more likely to let her past rest, even though she will probably never be able to forget Piku, as a later passage of her narrative will reveal.



*The Fifth Day* explores the other unexpected connection between Suraj and Vidya in more detail as their paths (almost) cross during a visit to the Sun Temple. Additionally, this section will reveal more coincidences within the network as some of the other characters also accidentally meet each other. The beginning of *The Fifth Day* first focuses on Suraj, who has gone for a swim in the sea, reflecting on his work with Nomi and the situation with his wife. Even though he has revealed earlier on in the narrative that he had imagined Nomi to look different, he now admits that he might have fallen in love with her: “Last night, after leaving Nomi in her garden, he had idled in bed, typing a text message to her which said, ‘The bottle’s finished, but the night is not.’ He had neither sent it nor deleted it, and was now relieved he had not been drunk enough to send her such corny drivel. The future was obvious. She would go home to some Nordic hulk of a boyfriend and he would go back to divorce papers from Ayesha” (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 181). The following passages of this fifth part of the novel mainly add pieces to the whole of the three women, who take a trip to the Sun Temple. When the three of them talk about their plans for the evening during the trip and Vidya notes that she would like to go to the tea stall the other two went to when she was feeling unwell, Gouri accidentally mentions that they might have seen Suraj there. Vidya then starts becoming worried as her son had told her in advance that he is on a business trip to Hyderabad (cf. *Sleeping on Jupiter* 192). She obviously does not know at that point that “[e]ven as she spoke, her son was closer than Vidya could have imagined: in a different part of the same ruins, climbing a flight of stone stairs bracketed by a pair of gryphons. [...] He could see Nomi nearby, crouched, changing a lens on her camera” (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 193). Even though the characters of the two different wholes are in the same place, their stories will not merge into one whole; when Suraj spots his mother’s friend Latika, he remembers that his mother had told him about their trip to Jarmuli and hurries

to the exit, leaving Nomi behind in the ruins (cf. *Sleeping on Jupiter* 198-99). The scene at the ruins is interrupted by a passage that focuses on Badal and Raghu (cf. *Sleeping on Jupiter* 200-208) but then switches back to Suraj, who has escaped to the temple's car park, where he opens Nomi's laptop and searches for more private information about her until the driver arrives and tells him that it is time to go back to the hotel (cf. *Sleeping on Jupiter* 209-10). The following scene switches back to the three women, who are also on their way to the hotel, and reveals that Vidya is worried about her son, even though she has not seen him at the temple and therefore does not know for sure whether Gouri had really spotted him at the beach. As the narrator reveals,

[t]he sense of misgiving which had taken root in her after hearing that Gouri had caught sight of her son weighed her down, and tired her out. First her ill health, then that molten sun pouring down on her head all afternoon, then Suraj. She tried reminding herself of the many times Gouri had confused one person with another. But the same thought went around her brain in concentric circles that tightened into an aching noose. Why had her son followed her to Jarmuli? (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 212)

The reader is aware of the fact that Suraj has not followed her but rather tries to escape from her, probably fearing questions about Ayesha and the fact that he is accompanied by the girl from the train. Even though Suraj has managed to escape from his mother, there are more coincidences in the following that will bring Nomi, Badal and Gouri together, thus indicating how paths may accidentally intersect within the network. Badal accidentally meets Nomi at the Sun Temple, offering to take her back to the marketplace in Jarmuli (cf. *Sleeping on Jupiter* 222). At the marketplace, Nomi, who is suddenly followed by an unknown person, accidentally meets Gouri, left behind by the other women, who have entered a shop to buy a bottle of vodka. Nomi is relieved to see her, telling her that she is probably followed by a monk: "Do you remember me? This really is a small place, no? I'm so glad you're here! My friend abandoned me at the Sun Temple, then I took a bus and then I got a lift on a scooter, but now someone is following me. A monk...see? Behind that shop with the saris? That one, with the long hair. [...] He's been after me from the first day I came here" (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 224). Gouri ironically tells her that a monk would never do her any harm, and, suffering from dementia, confuses the situation with the one that took place on the second day of their stay, thinking that they are on their way to the Vishnu temple: "Then – of course, she remembered – she was waiting for the guide to the Vishnu temple. Vidya and Latika had gone on ahead in a rickshaw. The guide had told her he would take her on his scooter. He had asked her to wait till he brought his scooter from the parking lot, but then he had not come back" (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 225). Gouri and Nomi subsequently take a rickshaw to the temple, and Latika and Vidya start searching for

Gouri when they return from the shop (cf. *Sleeping on Jupiter* 225-26). It remains unclear what happens to Gouri at the temple as the following scene only focuses on Nomi, who has by then arrived at the hotel.

### Defying Wholeness and Closure

This scene at the hotel and the few more that follow afterwards conclude the narrative, whose separate wholes are finally not assembled into one large whole and mostly defy a sense of closure. When Nomi arrives at the hotel, she is, unsurprisingly, angry with Suraj for leaving her alone at the Sun Temple. The scene that then takes place in the hotel room is told from Suraj's perspective, who is not feeling well and is potentially drunk. At least, he does not seem to be able to fully understand what is actually happening after Nomi has entered his room and started an argument:

He wanted to chuck her out his room, not hear that voice any more, but that shoulder – that hacked-off sleeve, he could focus on little else – that sleeve had come off entirely – and now, somehow, his hands had torn most of the other one away too. He did not know how or why her kurta ripped. He hadn't pulled on it, she had moved away too quickly. And then – how did they end up in the shower? They were both in the cubicle, he had turned the water on full – jets of water. He held her under it, the water made her braids stick to her skull. He was rubbing shower gel all over her, but she was wriggling free, slippery with soap, just would not hold still even when he shook her and slapped her. And then she slipped from his hands – she slipped out of them, fell against the cubicle door, which swung open and she was flung out with it. She slammed down full length on the hard, shining floor. [...] A slow red trickle appeared from somewhere behind her ears. (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 230)

When Nomi manages to get up shortly afterwards, she is furious, first spraying anti-mosquito spray from the bathroom into his eyes and then attacking him with his carving knife (cf. *Sleeping on Jupiter* 232). Suraj finally manages to escape through the garden at the back of the hotel room and runs down to the beach, where he notices “an apparition from a nightmare. When it came closer it became a man. Yellow robes slid off the man's powerful shoulders as he moved. White hair fell to his shoulders. In spite of the darkness, he wore sunglasses. Suraj kneeled in the surf, transfixed, as the man came closer” (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 234). The passage ends like this, not revealing who the man, who might be the monk who had already been following Nomi, really is and what he is doing to Suraj. As Zaidi points out with regard to the ending, “[i]ts [the novel's] only disappointment is a denouement that appears contrived, as if a set of events had been engineered to push the story towards a dramatic climax” (“Book Review” n.p.). When Latika and Vidya later end up on the same beach, trying to distract themselves from

the fact that the hotel's search party still has not found Gouri, they notice the incident from a distance:

'Look! On the other side of the creek. How strange, in the water...' Vidya pointed at them.

'Is that man trying to kill him or save him?'

'I think the tall one is pushing the shorter one into the water.'

'No,' said Latika, 'I think the tall one is saving the other one from drowning. I can't see that well in the dark. But look, out there. The lights.'

Vidya turned her eyes to the lights on a ship far out in the sea. Then she turned back to the two men, except that now there was nobody. Nothing but the dissolving darkness, and the sea swallowing up the sand. (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 247)

Vidya is obviously not able to see that the man, who has presumably disappeared in the water, is her son. Additionally, the two women are still worried about Gouri even though Latika offers an optimistic response to Vidya's question whether she thinks they will be able to find her: "Yes, we will. Just hold on. Everything will be sorted out tomorrow. Wait and see" (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 247). This statement marks the end of the main narrative and the characters' fifth day in Jarmuli, which is only followed by a short epilogue that reveals what happens on *The Eighteenth Day*.

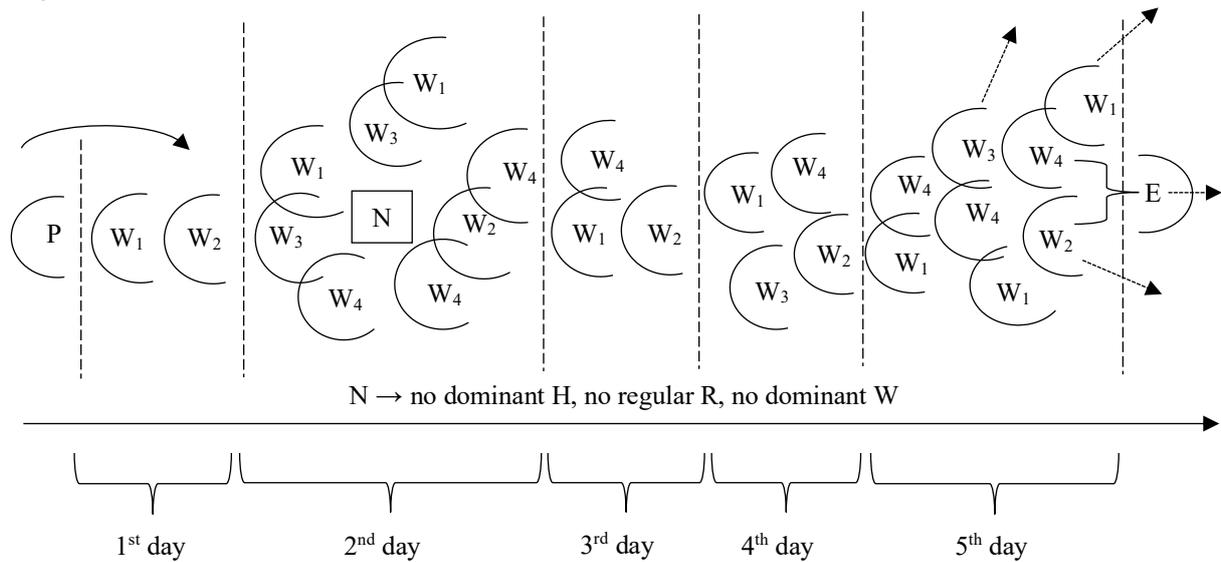
Inserted between the scene focusing on the fight between Suraj and Nomi and the one depicting the two women at the beach is the final piece of the whole of Nomi's first-person narration about her childhood experiences in the ashram. This final part of her report is directly addressed to Piku and reveals that Nomi had to leave her mentally disabled friend behind when she and another girl had decided to try to escape from the terrible place. Nomi still has a guilty conscience when she thinks of the day she had to abandon her friend: "I cried all the way in that van, thinking of the smile on your face the evening before when I stroked your knobby legs and arms in the way that always soothed you. I kept telling you I would come back for you. Did you understand that? I was the only person who knew what you were trying to say with your whimpers and squeals. That evening you made no sounds at all" (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 240). Since Nomi had not been able to return to the ashram to help Piku and the other girls, she still feels guilty, as she reveals in the following passage:

I spoke to you in my head then. I speak to you in my head all the time. Do you know the taste of betrayal? How would you know it? It's as if your clothes are full of sand, so full of sand that the grains bite you and pierce you and scratch you. You shake out your clothes, you wash them, you wash yourself, but even then, days later, years later, in the crevices of your toes, in the lining of the pockets, the grains pierce you. They're unbearable, those grains that don't go away whatever you do. You no longer know the real from the nightmare. Your heart, mind, mouth, everything is filled with sand. (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 241)

Even though Nomi will presumably never get over this betrayal, she seems to have found some kind of closure after her visit to the ruined ashram, which will become clear during *The Eighteenth Day*.

On that day, she is presumably back in Norway, going for a swim in a lake, in which she later also buries the objects she has found in the ruins of the ashram. *The Eighteenth Day* thus implies that Nomi's story will continue back in Norway, where her and other people's paths will cross in the future instead of expanding in isolation. When she is in the lake, "[t]he air is warm against her skin. She is barely moving, eyes on the stars until they start to fade. Your mother and your father and your brother have become stars, a woman had said once. Whenever you want to be with them, look up at the sky and there they are" (*Sleeping on Jupiter* 252). She then swims back to the shore, where she first puts a small statue and then a rusted metal object into the lake (cf. *Sleeping on Jupiter* 252), which seems to be a symbolic act of putting her past to rest. As this epilogue is told in the present tense, it creates a greater sense of immediacy, emphasising the fact that it is clearly set apart from the rest of the narrative, which now lies in the past. Since there is therefore a clear structural break and temporal gap between the five days that take place in Jarmuli and the day on which Nomi is back in Norway, the implication is that life will go on, even though not all of her and the reader's questions have been answered, particularly those surrounding Piku and Jugnu. Additionally, it is not clear what has happened to the other characters; even though Latika is optimistic, it is finally not revealed whether they manage to find Gouri the next day. It also remains unclear what has happened to Suraj and how the relationship between Badal and Raghu might develop. The novel does therefore eventually not evoke a sense of closure, implying that this would also be an unrealistic scenario in real life (even though the novel's many coincidences might also come across as contrived). Instead, it conveys the impression that the novel's separate wholes remain incomplete as their multiple pieces are arranged into a network that will continue to expand in various directions beyond the confines of the novel. This structural arrangement thus indicates that the characters' paths will continue to intersect with those of others in the future, creating more and more (potentially unexpected) connections and expanding the network without being able to achieve a sense of wholeness or to answer all of the questions that might arise on the way, due to limited perspectives. Even if Suraj is dead at the end of the novel, which is not entirely clear, and will therefore not be able to continue his path, this scenario would affect the lives of other characters, such as that of his mother, and therefore also contribute to an extension of the network. The same applies to the other characters, who will also continue to follow their

individual paths, expanding the network in new directions and creating new links every single day.



### 4.3 Finitude in Endless Expansion: Shubhangi Swarup’s *Latitudes of Longing*

Born in Nashik in 1982, Shubhangi Swarup grew up in Mumbai and now works as a journalist and educationist. *Latitudes of Longing*, published in 2018, is her only work of fiction so far. It was nominated for the JCB Prize for Literature in 2018 and for the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature a year later (cf. Saha n.p.). As Bhavya Dore additionally notes, Swarup “spent seven years interviewing and travelling for the novel. Much of it was alone. [...] Extensive travel and endless interviews across geographies may not be the most traditional way to write a novel” (n.p.). When asked about the writing process of her novel, Swarup herself said that indeed “[t]here must be a better way to do this. But once you are there, the stories come to you, the people come to you. And it’s beautiful to let go and take it each moment at a time. If I don’t know what I’m searching for, I’m open to everything” (Swarup qtd. in Dore n.p.). The result is a “debut novel [that] follows disparate but interconnected storylines across the Subcontinent and has already earned a clutch of flattering reviews” (Dore n.p.).

#### *Latitudes of Longing: An Overview of Content and Form*

Swarup’s novel, which is divided into four loosely connected parts, tells the stories of individuals inhabiting the Indian subcontinent and adjacent countries over the course of several

decades since Indian independence, offering a rich panorama of distinct places and cultures. As Tuktuk Ghosh points out in a review of the novel, “[i]t is an astounding exploration of intense longings, enmeshed deep in the primal allure of nature, beginning in the depths of the treacherous Andaman Sea, following unpredictable geological and emotional fault lines through the lush Irrawaddy delta and the tourist trap of Thamel, and ending amidst the highest glaciers and passes of the blinding Karakorams” (n.p.). The first part of the novel, *Islands*, which is by far the longest one, focuses on an Indian couple – Girija Prasad, a scientist who studies trees, and Chanda Devi, who has the ability to talk to plants and ghosts – living on the Andaman Islands, situated in the Bay of Bengal, during the 1950s. Both are continually confronted with forces that are beyond their control, such as natural disasters and premonitions. When they travel to a nearby island one day, they meet Mary, a young woman who has recently lost her husband and was therefore also forced to send her baby boy away. The second part of the novel, *Faultline*, focuses on the reunion of Mary and her son, Plato, now a student and supporter of a communist underground movement, who is imprisoned in Burma in the 1970s. The two are reunited with the help of Plato’s friend Thapa, a drug smuggler and the protagonist of the third part, *Valley*, which follows him to Kathmandu in Nepal, where he meets Bagmati, a dancer whose presence helps him cope with the loss of his family. When Thapa travels to India and passes the Karakoram mountains, he reaches a little village situated in the no-man’s land between Pakistan and India, where he meets Apo, the protagonist of the last part of the novel, *Snow Desert*. Apo, a widower and the grandfather of the village, has fallen in love with Ghazala, the mother of a Kashmiri trader, whom he finally marries in his late eighties.

As reviewer Urvashi Bahuguna notes with regard to the novel’s structure, “Swarup splits the story into four parts that intersect with one another at times but largely maintain their independence” (n.p.). Hence, “[i]n many ways, *Latitudes* is better described as a series of interconnected short stories” (Bahuguna n.p.). Each of the four stories is made up of several short chapters and episodes that are linked in an impressionistic fashion and interspersed with flashbacks and flashforwards. This structure must be understood as a network of loosely connected elements, with a wide range of incidents and experiences from the past, the present and the future being inseparably connected to each other and therefore also creating an impression of wholeness. At first sight, each of the four stories, which can be considered four separate wholes, seems to have its individual network that unfolds within it, conveying the impression that all of the characters are caught within their assigned territories and defenselessly exposed to a wide range of external forces. As reviewer Somak Ghoshal also points out in this context, “[f]rom the Indian Ocean islands to Burma (now Myanmar), Nepal

to the no-man's land separating India from Pakistan, the setting covers a wide canvas, mostly regions of inclement weather, scarred by natural disasters. With tsunamis, earthquakes, avalanches and tectonic shifts strewn over its body, this is a wounded novel, bristling with metaphorical energy" (n.p.). Bahuguna adds that the novel "isn't driven by characters so much as it is led by their relationships to what lies outside themselves – ghosts, the natural world, other people, storytelling, governments" (n.p.). However, the fact that the separate wholes are loosely connected by the motif of recurring characters as "[i]n each section [...] a character is introduced whose story carries into the next" (Bahuguna n.p.) creates a regular rhythm and indicates that the networks of each of the four wholes may extend into the other ones, demonstrating that everything is connected in potentially unimaginable ways and that the boundaries of the four seemingly separate entities are therefore fluid. This formal arrangement indicates that everything is, in fact, part of one large network that has the potential for endless expansion. By employing this structure, the novel emphasises, on the one hand, the powerlessness of the individual and the mortality of humans, who are caught within their separate territories as they struggle against various external forces that are beyond their control, and, on the other hand, the possibility to transgress the boundaries of these territories and to live on forever in a realm that extends beyond this physical world. The novel's horizontal network structure thus also alludes to the immortality of the human soul, reflecting the metaphysical dimension that the characters allude to several times in the course of the narrative and conveying a sense of wholeness in a universe in which everything is connected in some way.

### **The First Whole: Girija Prasad and Chanda Devi on the Andaman Islands**

The two protagonists of the first whole of the novel are repeatedly confronted with natural disasters and the presence of ghosts during their stay on the Andaman Islands shortly after India's independence. The fact that their story is told within one autonomous whole reflects, in structural terms, the idea that they are caught in their territory and defenselessly exposed to the islands' forces of nature. Girija Prasad, a Commonwealth scholar, and his wife, Chanda Devi, who displays supernatural abilities, have just got married when the story begins. The opposition between the scientifically-minded husband and his spiritually highly evolved wife is stressed throughout the whole story. In fact, their opposing views and mindsets present two different approaches to analysing and coping with the forces of nature and the isolation they are confronted with on a daily basis. This opposition therefore also alludes to the tensions between

humans and potentially higher forces that may easily overwhelm them. The opposition between science and experiences that lie beyond scientific explanation is stressed right at the beginning of their whole when Chanda Devi notices the presence of a ghost that keeps her from falling asleep: “She’s wide awake, distraught because of the accusatory cries emanating from the other side. It is the ghost of a goat. The goat escaped countless realms to come wander on their roof. And now its restless hooves have descended to stand under the open window, filling the room and her conscience with guilt” (*Latitudes of Longing* 4). Chanda Devi is convinced that it is Girija’s fault that the goat’s restless spirit keeps appearing at night, which her husband, a scientist who is unable to perceive the presence of ghosts, cannot believe:

‘There’s no goat roaming in our house,’ he replies in exasperation.

She sits up. The bleating has grown louder, as if to tell her to convey to her dreamy husband, ‘You took away my life, but you can’t take away my afterlife, you sinful meat-eater!’

‘It’s just outside our window,’ she tells him.

‘Does it scare you?’

‘No.’

‘Are you threatened by this goat?’

‘No.’

‘Then perhaps you could ignore it and go back to sleep.’ He meant to say ‘should’ and not ‘could’, but he doesn’t have the courage to be stern. His wife, he has realized, doesn’t respond well to dialectics or coercion. In fact, she doesn’t respond well to most things. If only she were less attractive, he could have ignored her and gone back to sleep.

‘How can you sleep?’ she asks. ‘You hacked the innocent creature, minced its flesh, deep fried it with onions and garlic, then ate it. And you left its restless soul to haunt our house!’

[...] For the sake of his unborn children, he announces, ‘If it helps you sleep, I will stop eating meat.’

That’s how carnivorous Girija Prasad turns vegetarian, much to his wife’s and his own surprise. For the sake of a few hours of rest, he says goodbye to scrambled eggs, mutton biryani and beefsteaks forever. (*Latitudes of Longing* 4-5)

The passage makes it clear that it will be difficult for the two to lead a happy marriage and to cope with the forces they are confronted with on the islands. On the following few pages, Girija’s background story and passion for science are explained in more detail. He is India’s first Commonwealth scholar after returning with a degree from Oxford and “tasked with setting up the National Forestry Service in the first year of Independence, 1948” (*Latitudes of Longing* 7). His wife, on the other hand, has not been educated abroad, and Girija Prasad’s mother first finds it difficult to find an adequate wife for her son, who is “exceptionally intelligent, exceptionally qualified, with an exceptionally bright future. He was exceptionally handsome too” (*Latitudes of Longing* 8). When she approaches the baba of the village with her concerns, he easily finds a solution to the apparent problem: “He ate half a banana in silence, took the

garland and flung it in the air. It swirled several times and landed around the shoulders of a perplexed Chanda Devi who had been lost in hymns. And that is how the marriage between the man who studied trees and the woman who spoke to them was fixed” (*Latitudes of Longing* 8). As indicated by this quote, particularly the first whole of the novel has humorous undertones, emphasising the incompatibility between Girija’s scientific mindset and his wife’s spirituality. The fact that the omniscient narrator is able to make such humorous comments also emphasises the narrative hierarchy that has been established. Even though the opposition between Girija and Chanda is more than obvious at this point already, they eventually get married and “[t]he truth is, it was the islands that brought them together” (*Latitudes of Longing* 8). In fact, despite these fundamental differences, they soon realise that they have to stick together in order to survive on the islands, which are home to dangerous forces of nature. When Girija Prasad goes for a swim in the sea one day, his wife joins him. At first, “[h]e’s delighted to find Chanda Devi tugging at his leg. He’s impressed by her strokes and her courage to swim in a sari. But she’s tugging at him with such urgency that he is forced to follow her back. Chanda Devi, he realizes, isn’t here to swim along but to take him back to the shore” (*Latitudes of Longing* 35). The reason for Chanda Devi’s attempt to take her husband back to the shore is revealed shortly afterwards: a crocodile had turned up in the water. Girija Prasad is not sure how to deal with his wife’s premonitions and ability to talk to ghosts, as the narrator reveals shortly after the incident: “Girija Prasad is disillusioned with all the knowledge he’s spent his youth collecting and hoarding like an ant preparing for a long winter of reflection. Science, as he knows it, has no space for premonitions. Darwin’s proclamation – ‘survival of the fittest’ – has let him down. [...] If Chanda Devi could sense danger in the waters, why did she risk her own life?” (*Latitudes of Longing* 39). The higher powers responsible for the premonitions as well as the forces that govern animals and nature are beyond human control (even though there might be scientific explanations for the incidents concerning the latter) and may either help the couple or have a devastating impact on their lives. As their story is told within one separate whole, it conveys the impression that they are caught in this environment and fully controlled by the inexplicable forces around them. The fact that they therefore have to support each other in order to survive on the islands is also emphasised when Chanda Devi grows increasingly weak during her pregnancy and has a miscarriage after five and a half months (cf. *Latitudes of Longing* 53). However, it is not only Chanda Devi who suffers from physical weakness but also her husband, as the narrator reveals: “The room feels claustrophobic. Girija Prasad gets up to open the windows. He notices that Chanda Devi is awake and sits beside her. Even in her weak state, she can see that her husband is as fragile as a porcelain doll with cracks running through it.

Sometimes, when he reads a newspaper, his fingers tremble in the silence of his heavy breaths” (*Latitudes of Longing* 56). They are aware of the fact that the islands and their individual abilities have connected them and that they are dependent on each other in the place they have chosen as their home. When Chanda Devi notices her husband’s weakness, “[t]hat evening, Chanda Devi makes an effort to dress up. She discards the nightgown for a sari and styles her hair with jasmine oil. She enters the kitchen after two months. They share a pot of tea in silence. By the end of it, both have reached the same conclusion. Neither can make it alone” (*Latitudes of Longing* 56). Bahuguna, who quotes the same text passage in her review of the novel, argues that

Chanda Devi and Girija are brought together by their different but complimentary beliefs – each drawing knowledge, at times sceptically, from the other. While Girija searches for answers to questions like why a tree fossil previously only seen in Madagascar and Central Africa has been found in the Andamans, Chanda Devi engages with the ghosts on the islands, dabbles in premonitions and warnings for the islanders who flock to her for advice, and calms wild, murderous elephants. Both arrive at the conclusion that on this island ‘neither can make it alone.’ (n.p.)

Hence, both of them notice that they have to stick together if they want to survive in the dangerous and unsettling environment they live in and support each other during their phases of weakness.

### **A Network within the Whole**

This first whole of the novel is also interspersed with flashbacks and flashforwards, providing the history of the islands and of the house the couple now live in as well as glimpses of what their future might look like, which conveys the impression that it is impossible to tell the characters’ stories in a linear fashion as there are various forces that shape their actions and experiences simultaneously. This structural set-up of the novel thus implies that the past, the present and the future are all connected and affect each other; in fact, they form a dense network that extends within the first whole of the novel, indicating that all of the forces of the past, the present and the future make up one unified whole and, in this case, shape life on the Andaman Islands. For instance, the bungalow Girija Prasad and Chanda Devi move into used to be the home of Lord Goodenough during the colonial period before it got destroyed by an earthquake (cf. *Latitudes of Longing* 16). When the Japanese later occupied the islands, they “saw in it an opportunity. Like a professional cardsharp dealing out a new round, they would put the house back together and declare it their headquarters, building bunkers on the surrounding slopes”

(*Latitudes of Longing* 16). When Chanda Devi later moves into the bungalow and is able to feel the presence of all of the spirits of the deceased who used to live there, she makes “all those who called the bungalow their home, living and dead alike, nervous. Like the bachelor Girija Prasad, the place was jittery on its stilts. Her presence confused the ghosts of freedom fighters, the perpetually starving snail-eaters, and Lord Goodenough himself [...]” (*Latitudes of Longing* 19). As Bahuguna notes in this context, “[t]hrough the ghosts and historical sites on the island, Swarup tells the island’s tale of colonisation by the British, the Japanese, and ultimately the Indian mainland. The ghosts of Japanese soldiers and British lords roam the land, and are only seen and understood by Chanda Devi” (n.p.). The fact that there are several flashbacks and flashforwards throughout this first whole of the novel, which displays a strong metaphysical dimension, draws attention to the circumstance that the past is never fully absent and that there are connections between the past, the present and the future that may go beyond the physical world. Later on in the narrative, there is a flashforward that emphasises this impression. When Girija and his wife talk about snow one day, Girija also dreams of snow the same night, reporting that his bungalow is covered in it. The next short paragraph jumps to the future: “Nine years after Girija Prasad stayed awake to adorn the islands and his bride with snow, he will find himself sinking into the white magic once again, this time as a father. Strolling with his daughter on a beach, he will hold her hand to prevent her from running into the tide, for she is as unpredictable as her mother” (*Latitudes of Longing* 44). It might not be completely clear at this point whether Girija only imagines having a daughter in the future or whether it will come true. Nevertheless, the fact that the omniscient narrator seems to be able to report an event of the future conveys a sense of predetermination, alluding to the fact that life might be fully controlled by higher powers that exist beyond the physical world.

The strong sense of a close connection between the past, the present and the future is also emphasised when Girija and Chanda have a discussion about Chanda’s second pregnancy. Her husband suggests that they move to Calcutta, arguing that she will need “the best medical help this country can offer, not a retired English doctor who also treats elephants. I shall ask my mother to stay with us. You cannot suffer like the last time” (*Latitudes of Longing* 74). Chanda Devi is not amused when she hears her husband’s suggestions, arguing that “[n]o one can change destiny” (*Latitudes of Longing* 74). Once again, it becomes clear that their views differ considerably, with Girija replying that it is his responsibility to take care of her and the baby, before admitting that he is unable to discuss metaphysical issues with her: “I cannot argue with you over metaphysics. My intellect doesn’t stretch that far. But what happened to you was my fault. I should have known that pregnancies could be complicated on an island with no

infrastructure, only jails and penal settlements. Do you know where our child would have been born, had things gone as planned?” (*Latitudes of Longing* 74-75). Chanda Devi is surprised when her husband reveals to her that he had intended to “sanitize one of the cells in Cellular Jail and convert it into a makeshift clinic. Since you are sensitive to ghosts, I chose a cell where no one had died. The prisoner was a poet who made it back to the mainland. It was a happy ending, so to speak, leaving no reasons for him to haunt the cell” (*Latitudes of Longing* 75). After this discussion, there is another flashforward in the following short scene, which describes a situation that will take place in ten years’ time:

Many years later, ten to be precise, he will find himself at the same place at the same time of the evening, this time with his daughter, who is light enough to be lifted from the boat to the bank. It is still the land of mudskippers and will be so for centuries to come. Like her father, the girl can distinguish between tadpoles, mudskippers and salamanders, toying with the idea of evolution as if it were a fairy tale.

‘Papa,’ she asks him as he places her on the ground, ‘after hundreds of generations, will the mudskippers evolve into frogs or fish? Will they live on water or land? Which way are they going?’

‘Child, I cannot look into the future.’

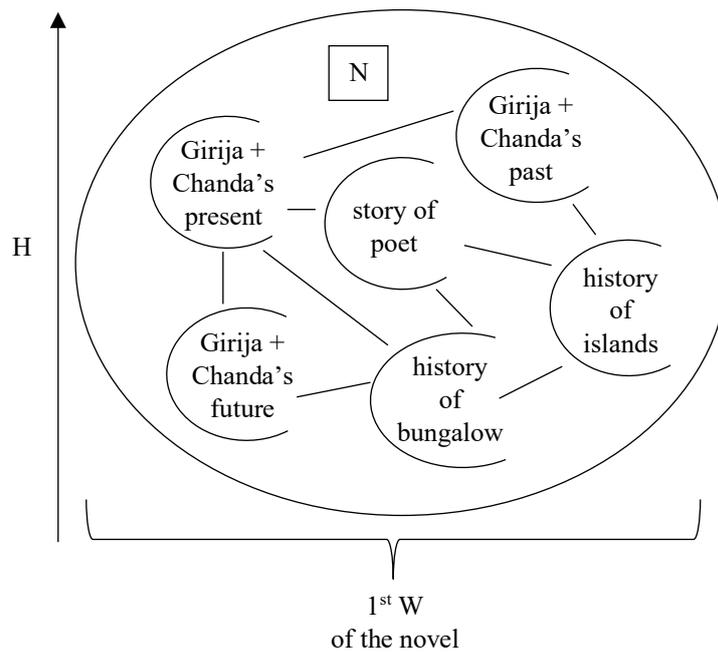
‘Why not?’

If only he could. (*Latitudes of Longing* 75)

The narrator is able to jump to a scene taking place in the future, an ability Chanda Devi does, in contrast to her husband, also display.

The following episode takes the reader back in time, revealing the story of the poet who was imprisoned on the island five years before Indian independence. The scene is therefore connected to the conversation that took place before the flashforward about Girija and his child in the future. On the one hand, this break and the insertion of an incident that will take place in the future emphasises the gap between the different time periods, which have all shaped life on the islands. On the other hand, it suggests that it is possible to bring the various temporal dimensions together and to turn them into the elements of a network that is capable of connecting the past, the present and the future of one specific place, thereby conveying a sense of wholeness. As the narrator reveals in the following passage about the poet, “[i]n 1942, five years before India gained independence, the bespectacled Poet entered Cellular Jail in Port Blair. Among the inmates, this was a cause for celebration. They sought redemption in his proximity, like the thieves crucified beside Jesus Christ” (*Latitudes of Longing* 76). The narrator further reveals that the poet had “threatened to bring down the Empire with his thoughts. He had penned the movement’s most popular slogans and lyrics” (*Latitudes of Longing* 76). The flashbacks that focus on the island’s history demonstrate that the whole telling the story about Chanda Devi and her husband can be extended in various directions and reach back into the

past. The various episodes of the whole must therefore be understood as the single elements of a network that is situated within this whole, held together by an omniscient narrator. The whole does therefore not only present the story of Chanda Devi and Girija Prasad but also tries to envision the story of the islands as a whole, a place deeply affected and shaped by India's history of colonialism. The whole that is created in the first part of the novel therefore has the potential to combine various facets of the place, which is shaped by a long history of occupation and, at the same time, shapes the lives of the individuals now living there.



The following scene moves back to the present moment, depicting Chanda and Girija shortly before leaving the islands. Inserted between this passage and the one that displays Girija at work in Calcutta after their move to the mainland is an account of the earthquake that takes place in 1954, shortly after they have left the islands behind. It becomes clear that they have just escaped in time since the earthquake would otherwise have overwhelmed them. As the narrator reveals, “[t]he earthquake of 1954 goes down as the second largest recorded since the invention of the seismograph. Scientifically speaking, it displayed the longest duration of faulting ever observed. Researchers attributed tremors in regions as far as Siberia and several more quakes and tsunamis to the event” (*Latitudes of Longing* 85). In the following scene, Girija, Chanda Devi and Mary, a poor and lonely woman who has accompanied them to the mainland, also notice the earthquake in Calcutta, and “[t]wo months after the earthquake hit the Andamans, Devi is born hundreds of miles away from the epicenter. Girija Prasad holds the tightly wrapped bundle in his arms as her mother receives stitches. Devi looks at her father with

fresh black eyes” (*Latitudes of Longing* 89). The separate passage about the earthquake that hits the Andamans is integrated into the network that expands throughout the first whole of the novel, placing emphasis on the fact that Chanda Devi and her husband have escaped a greater tragedy, with the forces of nature that lie beyond their control potentially overwhelming them. As Latha Anantharaman also notes in her review of the novel, “[t]he earth often shakes, monstrous waves often rise, and human endeavours are obliterated again and again” (n.p.). However, shortly afterwards, Chanda Devi’s previous assumption that it is impossible to change destiny turns out to be true: “Chanda Devi barely speaks, she barely blinks. She leaves the world with her eyes open, meditating upon the image of father and daughter holding on to each other. If only Girija Prasad had read the warning signs. If only he had looked deep into Chanda Devi’s eyes. So deep that he could have seen what she saw” (*Latitudes of Longing* 89). Even though Girija has moved his pregnant wife to the mainland to ensure she is given the best medical treatment possible, they are unable to escape Chanda Devi’s fate, as she would have seen it. The following scene moves back to the Andamans, where “[t]he earthquake leaves behind a gaping crack where Goodenough Bungalow stands, meandering through the garden and the ground below the stilts like a seasonal stream” (*Latitudes of Longing* 91). The single elements of the network therefore become connected; the earthquake, which was reported within its own powerful element of the network, is now linked to the episode that focuses on the portrayal of the aftermath of the earthquake and the continuation of Girija’s story.

After the death of his wife, Girija decides to move back to the islands when his daughter is one year old, with Mary accompanying them. Girija and Chanda had first met Mary during one of their several trips to Savitri Nagar. She is a young woman who has lost her husband and had therefore also been forced to send away her child. As the pastor of the community had revealed, “[s]he’s barely twenty and her life has ended’ [...]. Her husband, a labourer from Burma, had died in an accident. The pastor had paid for the burial and transported their eight-month-old son back to Rangoon, for how was Mary expected to look after a child all alone, when she was herself a child?” (*Latitudes of Longing* 67). At that point, Mary becomes part of the first whole of the novel, which tells the story about Chanda Devi and her husband, and she later accompanies the latter back to the islands. As their former home is too damaged, they decide to move into the guesthouse on Mount Harriet. It gradually becomes clear that Mary, who is only a minor character in this first whole of the narrative and has only been mentioned a few times so far, now becomes an important figure to both father and daughter. In fact, “[i]n the house on Mount Harriet, Mary becomes the gravitational centre. She is the reason why things move and why things stay in place. Girija Prasad and Devi feel the deepest form of

gratitude and love towards her – they take her for granted” (*Latitudes of Longing* 93). Even though Mary becomes more and more important to Girija and his daughter, she remains a minor character in this first whole, and it is not yet predictable that Mary will be turned into one of the protagonists of the second whole of the novel, which is set in Burma.

The narrative subsequently focuses on Devi’s childhood and the development of the relationship between her and her father after the loss of Chanda Devi. When Devi is older, she is sent to the mainland to go to school there (cf. *Latitudes of Longing* 103), and Girija, who continues his life as a passionate natural scientist on the islands, is eager to come across new discoveries: “When Girija Prasad applies the radical new geological theories to the islands, the conclusions are obvious. [...] The Andaman Islands are part of a subduction zone, like Indonesia to the southeast and Burma, Nepal, the Himalayas and the Karakorams to the north. It is here that the Indian plate is sinking under the Asian plate” (*Latitudes of Longing* 107). This new geological insight connects the Andamans to other places that are far away, namely Burma, Nepal, the Himalayas and the Karakorams, the settings of the following wholes of the novel. The choice of the settings is therefore not completely random but has a deeper scientific meaning, alluding to the fact that there might be invisible connections everywhere in the world, and that, in fact, everything in the universe may be connected in some way. As Ghoshal notes with reference to a statement made by Girija before his marriage,

[e]arly on, Girija Prasad Verma, a scientist employed by the first government of independent India to set up the National Forestry Service, realizes, after spending a year at his posting in the Andamans, that ‘no island is an island’: ‘It is part of a greater geological pattern that connects all the lands and oceans of the world.’ This statement, profound in its simplicity, conjures up an image of interwoven lives, giving the novel its restlessly meandering structure. (n.p.)

Despite his passion for science, Girija feels lonely after his return to the islands, and his loneliness is increased when Mary announces that she will soon leave him too as “[h]er son, the infant she had left behind twenty-three years ago, has sought her out” (*Latitudes of Longing* 113). Her decision to leave the islands prepares the beginning of the following, second whole, indicating that the network of the first whole will expand into the next one. As Mary notes before her departure, “Devi’s future lies on the mainland” (*Latitudes of Longing* 113) too, meaning that Girija is likely to spend the rest of his life in solitude on the islands. One day, shortly before Devi is about to visit him with her own child, Girija feels that it is time for him to leave this physical world as an overwhelming force approaches:

Based on the volume and distance of the ocean’s recession, he estimates that a tsunami should hit the beach in ten to fifteen minutes. This presents him with two options. He could either sprint back to the beach’s edge, begin climbing Mount Harriet and crawl

up a tree – an ideal vantage point. Or he could walk straight in. The land falls sharply like a cliff very close to the beach. For how often does a man get to peer into a thriving ocean floor minus the ocean, even though it will go undocumented? (*Latitudes of Longing* 124)

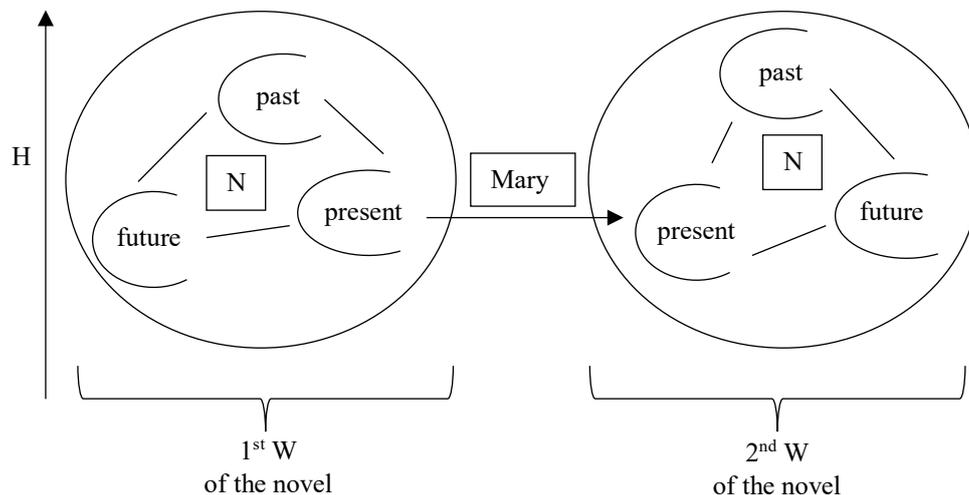
Girija is sure that he has made the right decision, and the approaching tsunami seems to excite him more than anything else he had been able to experience during his lifetime: “Standing face to face with a tsunami, he is distracted by a youthful stiffness. He’s sporting an erection – a perfect right angle to his legs, pointing straight ahead. He laughs. His eyes well up. Girija Prasad Varma sheds a tear. And the water carries him away” (*Latitudes of Longing* 126). The first whole of the novel is therefore concluded by forces of nature, which overwhelm and deeply delight Girija at the same time. As Anantharaman notes in terms of the impact of the forces of nature on Girija’s life, “[e]arthquakes and devastating storms shape the life of Girija Prasad, his love for Chanda Devi, the birth of his daughter, and his own end as he follows a retreating tsunami to examine the bare ocean floor, certain of death but a curious scientist to the last” (n.p.). The novel therefore places emphasis on the individual’s powerlessness in the face of natural disasters but also stresses the fact that there might be life beyond this physical incarnation. Even if this might not be a possibility, it is clear that life goes on for other people and that the world as a whole is not affected by the loss of one individual. Hence, the fact that the first whole of the novel ends at this point signifies that Girija’s physical life has ended, but the network his story has been part of continues to expand into the following whole focusing on Mary, the woman with whom he had spent many years of his life.

### **The Second Whole: Mary and Plato in Burma**

The following part of the novel is set in Burma and starts with the day of the arrest of Mary’s twenty-three-year old son, Plato, who therefore also seems to be caught within his separate whole as he is confronted with the dominant political forces of the time. Bahuguna adds that “[t]his second section called *Faultline* explores Burma’s troubled history in the seventies as protests against inflation and food storages are violently suppressed by the government” (n.p.). As the narrator reveals about Plato’s background, “[h]e joined the underground movement on campus. Inspired by communism, he orchestrated three strikes in two years. As an active member of the student’s union, he wrote, edited and distributed pamphlets under the pseudonym ‘Plato’, a man who believed philosophers, not army generals, were kings” (*Latitudes of Longing* 131). When Plato is arrested, he and the other revolutionaries are driven into the jungle, where many of them are killed at night, and the survivors are afterwards imprisoned (cf. *Latitudes of*

*Longing* 132). In the following paragraph, the reader is introduced to Thapa, a friend of Plato's, who visits him in prison ten days after his arrest. Thapa is only a minor character in this second whole of the novel but will be turned into the main protagonist of the third one. At this point, the reader already learns that Thapa is involved in smuggling drugs and that "Plato would talk to him about politics and philosophy. An uneducated man, Thapa, in return would train Plato in business" (*Latitudes of Longing* 133). The fact that Plato appears in an autonomous part of the novel indicates that he is just as defenselessly exposed to larger external forces as the characters from the first whole of the novel.

Additionally, this second whole is also interspersed with flashbacks, mainly surrounding Mary, who had been forced to send Plato away after her husband's death, a circumstance that has also significantly shaped Plato's life. Hence, just like the previous one, this second whole contains a network of past, present and future incidents that are inseparably connected.



The following passage switches to the Andaman Islands, first revealing the story of how Thapa had been able to find Mary: "In the busy market, a Karen woman points her out to Thapa as she waits for her turn outside a miller's shop. Her son has sent him to find her, Thapa explains. 'He is not a criminal,' he says. 'He is a university student who masterminded protests against the rulers.' [...] Mary's tears flow down like rivers across the white to mingle with the afternoon sweat" (*Latitudes of Longing* 134). Thapa continues to inform Mary about the incidents surrounding Plato's arrest until the end of the section, and in the following one "Mary leaves the Indian archipelago in a dinghy. Tears, as ancient as life and as young as the rain, push the dinghy towards the Irrawaddy delta to a place where the river latches on to the sea with nine limbs, creating sandbanks to tighten its grip" (*Latitudes of Longing* 138). After these flashbacks, the narrative moves back to Plato, who is tortured in prison along with his comrades (cf. *Latitudes of Longing* 140-41), before the following chapter once more focuses on Mary,

revealing the part of her life story that had taken place before she ended up living with Chanda Devi and her husband. In this flashback, the narrator informs the reader that Mary was born in 1926 and that she married a Burmese boy when she was fourteen, with whom she had to elope to a nearby village since her family did not consent to the marriage (cf. *Latitudes of Longing* 145-50). After some time, her Burmese husband starts beating her and is himself treated like an outsider on the islands. As the narrator reveals, “[w]hile the Karens were left alone, the Burmese were persecuted after a group was caught stealing from the warehouse. Riffraff like Rose Mary’s husband were picked up and beaten to the rhythm of imperial slogans. [...] The island seemed to be closing in on the Burman. He stopped working and started drinking at home instead” (*Latitudes of Longing* 150-51). The couple’s situation subsequently becomes more and more precarious as they struggle financially and therefore also drift apart in personal terms. The following chapter switches back to Plato in prison, where the students have gone on a hunger strike (cf. *Latitudes of Longing* 154), before the narrator continues the story of Mary and her Burmese husband on the Andaman Islands. The narrator reveals that Mary is eight months pregnant when the conflict with her husband, who keeps beating her and orders her to cook food for him, escalates:

He kicked her waist. The baby kicked her womb. Unable to bear the pain, Rose Mary stretched her arm out and picked up the rice pounder lying nearby. [...] The Burman lifted his foot to kick her once again. She hit his ankle with the rice pounder. He fell down, the demon dancer of the act. He writhed in pain. Rose Mary, the vanquisher, rose from the ground. She walked to her makeshift kitchen and sifted through her weapons. She strode across, crouched over him and slit the vein in his throat, the same one she brought pigs and fowl and dogs down with. The beating stopped. The rhythm stopped. Time stopped. Rose Mary witnessed the blood drain out of his body. [...] The three of them – husband, wife and the child in her womb – spent the night soaked in his blood. (*Latitudes of Longing* 163)

In the following short episode, it is revealed that Mary has just told Thapa this story: “Mary began her story at the topmost step. She ends it on the ground. Thapa sits curled up on the stairs, reeling at the thought of being kicked in the womb” (*Latitudes of Longing* 165). Finally, Mary has been able to reveal her disturbing background story to another character, and the fact that this second whole is therefore also interspersed with flashbacks conveys a strong sense of connectedness of past and present events, which are all part of one endless network that expands across the separate wholes and beyond them. After Mary has told Thapa her story, the narrator expresses a similar idea: “They are lost. The present has come crashing down, pulled by the gravity of the past. The present is the past. They stand, unable to move a limb, like the first forms of life that ventured on to land” (*Latitudes of Longing* 165). This idea of a merging of

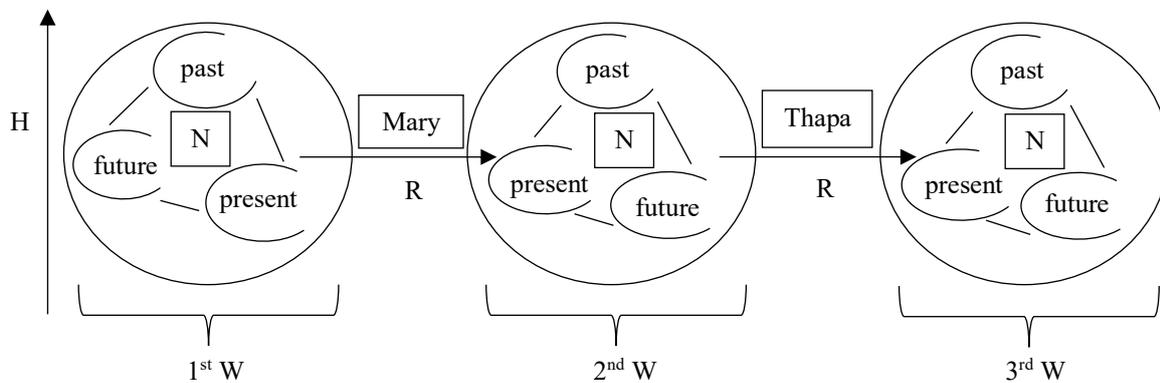
past and present is reflected by the structure of the novel; instead of viewing the past and the present as two separate entities that do not influence each other, the two dimensions are directly linked to each other in the novel's network and hence also become part of a greater whole. When Thapa is able to overcome his silence after listening to Mary's story, he notes that she could have stopped when she hit his ankle (cf. *Latitudes of Longing* 165) instead of killing her husband. Mary thinks that "[s]he could have. But she didn't. Mary was afraid her son may not understand the truth either. His father wasn't a monster. Nor is she a murderer" (*Latitudes of Longing* 165).

The effects of her actions are still noticeable in the present, which becomes clear when Thapa meets Plato in prison again and they start talking about his mother. When Plato asks Thapa why his mother abandoned him as a child, Thapa tells him the whole story, reassuring him that, in Mary's words, his "father wasn't a monster" and his "mother isn't a murderer" (*Latitudes of Longing* 168), and adding that hunger had been the real reason for her actions. In a flashforward, the narrator then reveals that, "[s]omewhere, in the distant certainties of the future, Plato is a free man, roaming in the jungles of Namdapha as an armed insurgent" (*Latitudes of Longing* 170). In addition to bringing the past into the present, the narrative also provides a glimpse into the future in the form of flashforwards, thus closely connecting the three temporal dimensions. In the flashforward following the scene in which Plato is still in prison, the narrator notes that, "[w]ithin a year of his release, he will dodge the intelligence officials and escape into India. He will train himself in guerilla warfare in the Himalayan jungles at the Indo-Burmese border. He will operate under a new name for twelve years. His life as an armed revolutionary will abruptly come to an end when the Indian military intelligence will lure his faction into a trap and throw them in prison on false charges" (*Latitudes of Longing* 185), before releasing Plato again after another ten years (cf. *Latitudes of Longing* 186). The fact that the narrator repeatedly looks into the future conveys the impression that Plato's life (or at least certain stages of it) is already predetermined, possibly by a higher power. In the last chapter of this second whole of the novel, the narrator moves back to the present moment, revealing how Plato is released from the first prison in Burma. A photographer takes a photo of the crowd as the prisoners are reunited with their families and friends; the scene is told with internal focalisation through the anonymous photographer, who "lets his camera hang around his neck as he wipes his face. He looks around vacantly. He senses some movement behind him. Two people stand on the other side of the wall, across the narrow road. [...] The photographer has tears in his eyes as he watches them embrace. [...] Who else could they be, but a mother and son?" (*Latitudes of Longing* 194). Plato and his mother are finally reunited

after decades of separation, making it clear that it is possible for Plato to transgress the boundaries of his assigned whole.

### The Third Whole: Thapa in Nepal

Thapa, Plato's friend, who has made this reunion possible in the first place as he was the one to track down Mary on the Andaman Islands, is turned into the protagonist of the third whole of the novel. This arrangement of forms, which additionally creates a regular rhythm of recurring characters, conveys the impression that everything is connected in some way as a character, in this case Thapa, may break into the whole occupied by two other main characters and then extend the network that is situated within this whole into his own one.



This third whole of the novel opens with a scene in Kathmandu, Thapa's Nepalese home town. Even though Thapa is now at home, he does not feel comfortable in this environment: "Though Thapa can pass off as a local in most places, it is here, in the land of his birth, that he feels like an outsider. Nothing here reminds him of home. Except for that undeniable pull in his heart" (*Latitudes of Longing* 198). Later that day, he goes to a dance bar, where he hopes "to entertain a potential partner in crime. In two weeks, he will be transporting a consignment of party drugs across the western border into India. Though he hasn't used the route before, he is confident it will work. He will carry the packets inside carcasses of lambs. Transporting meat is common practice among nomads, especially before winter" (*Latitudes of Longing* 200-201). When he arrives home the next day, he meets a young woman who is sitting in front of his door. It turns out that she is a dancer in the dance bar and had already seen him the night before. When she asks Thapa why he had not let her entertain him the night before, Thapa remarks that she could, age-wise, be his daughter (cf. *Latitudes of Longing* 204). The young woman, Bagmati, or Bebo, as she likes to call herself, starts visiting Thapa on a regular basis from this point onwards and

seems to fill the gap left by the loss of his family. As Anantharaman adds in her review of the novel, “[l]ike Chanda Devi, Thapa is a clairvoyant who foresaw that his family would be buried under rubble. Haunted by his loss, he seems to find his daughter again in Bagmati, a stripper at a bar in Kathmandu. He feeds her, earns money to buy her a new life, and looks for stories to tell her” (n.p.). One of the following elements of the network reveals Bagmati’s background story; it turns out that she ran away from home at the age of fifteen and then got a job in the dance bar. It becomes clear that her life is characterised by loneliness and poverty and that she is, in fact, so desperate that she considers killing herself (cf. *Latitudes of Longing* 216-19). Hence, it is not only Thapa who seems to be caught in a whole of loneliness and desperation, mostly shaped by external forces. Despite their age difference, the two get on well and seem to have several things in common; Thapa reveals that he had once intended to kill himself too, and it also turns out that he is not satisfied with his life when he finally starts telling her a story that seems to be his own life story. He reveals to her that his entire village once got buried by landslides and that he has lost everything, which is why he cannot keep himself from crying during his narration (cf. *Latitudes of Longing* 214-15). In one of his following stories, Thapa draws specific attention to the power of the forces of nature, which are in many ways the true rulers of the planet and the Indian subcontinent in particular: “This land is a complete land. It has its own desert, sea, glacier, rivers, even its own unique sun and rain which it doesn’t share with the rest of the world. The elements are the rulers. They are the gods, the monsters, the rebels, the revolutionaries, the dancers, the smugglers, the generals, the kings, the poor, the rich, the lovers, the children, the parents. The elements are human” (*Latitudes of Longing* 226). The passage draws attention to the power of the elements, indicating that they are capable of shaping all life on earth and of taking any form possible. Thapa’s own story is also significantly shaped by these powerful elements, which he now reveals in more detail:

Once upon a time, long, long ago, a landslide swallowed his world. It left him behind to sit on the rubble, even as his soul was trapped below. He sat in this bardo state for days, his soul in between death and birth. He sits like this even now, unable to reclaim the corpses of the past or move on to a new body. The floods that brought on the landslide have disappeared. One day, a heavy sun comes out. It makes his eyes water. He begins to cry. He cries for days, so many days that even the days confuse themselves for one another, because he looks the same each day, crying in the same position, sitting on the rubble. His tears stream down to create a pond. And out of the pond, walks a little girl. A girl born from his tears. He is her father. (*Latitudes of Longing* 227)

The story Thapa starts telling reveals his personal experiences and also features Bagmati in the form of the girl who walks out of the water. The gods control the elements, and, “[w]hen he was crying, the gods had watched him. The goddess of rain felt remorse, for the cloud that had

burst with sudden excitement, causing the landslide, was one of her devotees. To make amends, she sent down her daughter, a river, from heaven. Bagmati is a kind river. She volunteered to come down to banish landslides from the Himalayas forever, teaching the clouds and rains to spread happiness instead” (*Latitudes of Longing* 227-28). Hence, Thapa and Bagmati are also united in the story Thapa is telling her over the course of three nights, revealing how the landslide has changed his life and how he feels about Bagmati. The story must therefore be understood as a separate and powerful element of the network, which demonstrates that the past, the present and the future are all part of one whole that is to a great extent shaped by forces that are beyond human control.

Additionally, Plato also finds his way into this third whole of the novel when he meets Thapa at a rooftop restaurant in Kathmandu, indicating that the boundaries between the separate wholes are fluid and that the novel’s network may therefore expand in various directions. Plato is thus able to turn up as a minor character in the third whole of the novel, which mainly focuses on Thapa. This once more conveys the impression that everything is connected in some way and that characters may be able to escape from the wholes and territories they are caught in, both in terms of content and structure. It turns out that Plato “is here in Kathmandu to help Thapa plan his trip to India. It is a risk not worth taking, in his opinion. But who can convince Thapa to relinquish an opportunity to make money?” (*Latitudes of Longing* 222). Plato shows up in the third whole of the novel to help his friend, who had already helped him in the previous one, demonstrating that the boundaries of the various wholes are not fully rigid. Additionally, this arrangement of forms makes it clear that even though all of the characters have their separate stories to tell, their paths do not unfold in isolation but inevitably converge with those of others, as in the other two novels analysed in this chapter. The narrator now also reveals more details about Plato, for instance that, “[a]fter spending twelve years in an Indian prison, Plato relishes the taste of fresh ginger. It is sharp, like the irony of being free in exile. All told, he has spent more than half his life in prison – Burmese and Indian. He was recently exonerated of all criminal conduct and offered asylum in the distant Netherlands. It is a strange idea” (*Latitudes of Longing* 222). In another flashback towards the end of this third whole of the novel, the narrator further reveals that, “[a]fter his release, Plato, survived as an armed insurgent at the Indo-Burmese border. He also supplied Thapa with raw opium from the eastern Himalayas. Together, they connected traditional opium cultivation with the bigger international nexus” (*Latitudes of Longing* 247-48). As the narrator also provides details on how Plato’s life has developed since his release from the Burmese prison at the end of the previous whole of the

novel, it draws attention to the fact that life will go on even if the narrator stops telling the story and concludes it with a happy ending (the reunion of Plato and Mary).

What happens to Bebo, however, finally remains unclear. When Thapa finishes telling his story about the power of the forces of nature during the third night, they talk about going to India together. However, it is not revealed whether she will ever be able to move to India when Thapa “leaves the next afternoon, with a promise to return. [...] Plato accompanies him for two more days, as far as the last official checkpoint” (*Latitudes of Longing* 241). During his journey to India, Thapa passes the no-man’s land “trapped between the steep rise of Tibet to the north and the sharp fall of the Indus to the south” (*Latitudes of Longing* 242), and reaches a little village, where he meets Apo, the village’s patriarch: “A great-grandfather to all, Apo has made it a point to interview every villager returning from the outside world and every outsider visiting the village” (*Latitudes of Longing* 243). At this point, Apo, who will be one of the protagonists of the final whole of the novel, is introduced. He asks Thapa whether he has seen a Kashmiri woman during his journey to the village as he intends to marry her (cf. *Latitudes of Longing* 243). However, before Apo’s story is told in more detail, the narrator switches back to Thapa at the beginning of the following paragraph, revealing that “[e]ver since Thapa could remember, he had possessed an indelible knowledge of the future. In his heart, he knew that no matter how hard his father worked, the crops would consistently fail for no fault of his. [...] His mother, fearful of his soothsaying ways, took him to a witch doctor to be cured. Gradually, the premonitions faded away” (*Latitudes of Longing* 245). Hence, the implication once more is that everything in the entire universe may be connected in some way, as reflected by the novel’s structure, and that Thapa is able to predict what the higher forces that govern human life have planned to happen, just like Chanda Devi from the first whole of the novel. The employment of characters and an omniscient narrator who are able to look into the future in the form of flashforwards further emphasises the impression that there are greater forces that determine the characters’ fates and therefore also shape the way their stories develop.

#### **The Fourth Whole: Apo in the Karakoram Mountains**

In the last whole of the novel, Apo’s story is told in more detail; Apo, a widower whose real name is Tashi Yeshe, is now 87 years old and the grandfather of the entire village. He falls in love with Ghazala, a Kashmiri woman staying in the village for some time with her son, a trader. After Apo has visited Ghazala in her hut, he cannot stop thinking about her: “As Apo lies restless in his bed that night, the ache in his bones isn’t the only reason for his discomfort. He

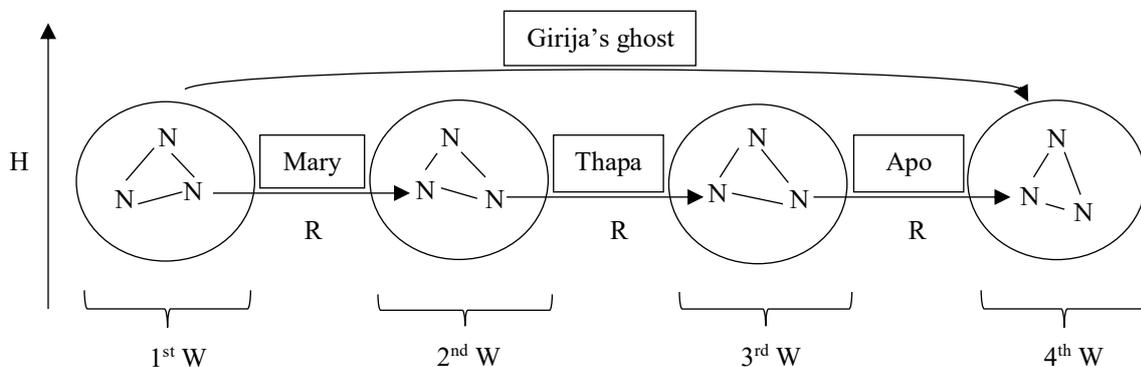
wonders how she must have looked in her youth. She has a big nose like most Kashmiris, one that grows bigger with age as the rest of the face melts away. Despite her sunken and faded eyes, Apo sees currents of glacial blue in them, just as he sees dignity in her wrinkles” (*Latitudes of Longing* 268). The narrator also reveals how frail Apo is at his age, being dependent on the help of his granddaughter, Ira, who lives in the same hut. Additionally, this fourth whole also includes flashbacks in its network, for instance one about Apo’s youth. It turns out that, “[a]t the age of seventeen, Tashi Yeshe chanced upon army officials offering sacks of grain at the local monastery. The Indian army was recruiting people from the border to protect the borders. [...] As a soldier-cook, he was sent to Ladakh for his first posting” (*Latitudes of Longing* 281). The narrator adds that Apo afterwards arrived at the village as an outsider and was initially asked to leave. However, he was finally allowed to stay and to marry the daughter of the village’s orchard owner (cf. *Latitudes of Longing* 286). By now, however, he has been widowed for around twenty years and once more feels love when he is with Ghazala.

When, one day, two foreigners – Raza, an officer, accompanied by Rana, a scientist – arrive at the village, the novel once more conveys the impression that everything in the universe is connected and governed by higher powers, and that even the boundary between the world of the living and the world of the dead is fluid. Raza and Rana have sought out Apo as he has the ability to predict earthquakes, and the two men reveal that they “lost two hundred and twenty men to avalanches last year. The Pakistani side lost one hundred and forty-one barely two years ago. Which is why [...] [they] have agreed to have scientists present at all times [...]” (*Latitudes of Longing* 297). Apo responds that “[e]ven if India, Pakistan and China stop fighting over the ice and unite to remain there, the mountains will win. Sons, tell your armies and scientist to leave the glaciers. That is the only way they can be safe” (*Latitudes of Longing* 298). He implies that human beings are powerless when it comes to natural disasters, which are never fully predictable. In the following chapter, it turns out that Rana is, in fact, the grandson of Girija Prasad from the first whole of the novel. As Anantharaman notes in this context, “[h]er [Swarup’s] tale ends with a scientist, as it began with one. That scientist is Rana, grandson of Girija Prasad, gardening in a greenhouse set on a glacier. He talks to his plants, even sings Hindi songs to them, and hallucinates about a yellow-eyed yeti wandering on the ice outside. Through all these human interactions beats the insistent pulse of the earth and its future” (n.p.). Even though Girija’s life had ended with the arrival of a tsunami on the islands, the stories of his descendants have not been told yet. Rana has just returned from the Indian outpost in Antarctica, “the biggest, driest and coldest desert in the world. Compared to it, the glaciers were the size of a neighbourhood” (*Latitudes of Longing* 303). As the narrator reveals, he was able to meet his

grandfather’s ghost two weeks ago after falling into a chasm. The narrator notes that in that very moment he “had a magical sensation of watching the scene as it unfolded on the glaciers. His spirit had detached itself from his body. It was staring at the soldiers kneeling in single file, counting down to zero before they pulled the rope” (*Latitudes of Longing* 307). The narrator adds that he “suspected his heart wasn’t the only thing pulsating in this abyss. As he discerned a foreign rhythm, he asked, ‘Who’s there?’” (*Latitudes of Longing* 308), and a voice responded that it is his grandfather, Girija:

‘Am I dead, Nana? Did I just break my neck when I fell down?’  
 ‘You are as fit and as alive as you were when you woke up.’  
 ‘Whiplash?’  
 ‘Your medulla oblongata is all right. It’s just a small jerk.’  
 ‘Then why am I talking to you?’  
 ‘Your grandmother could speak to ghosts and trees and almost all life forms. I don’t think your mother can, much like I couldn’t. Perhaps clairvoyance, like diabetes, skips a generation.’ (*Latitudes of Longing* 309)

Girija, whose story the narrator had apparently concluded at the end of the first whole of the novel, is able to sneak back into the narrative at this point, though not in his physical form. It thus becomes clear that he has the ability to extend his presence beyond the first whole of the novel, in which he had seemingly been caught, both in terms of content and structure.



It also turns out shortly afterwards that he does not only sneak into the story of his grandson but also into Apo’s. When the narrator switches back to Apo, he has married Ghazala, and when Apo one night watches his wife take a walk through the snow as she is searching for a lamb wailing outside, Girija’s ghost appears to him and tells him the following: “In the first few months of our marriage, my wife too would hear a goat whimper in the dead of night” (*Latitudes of Longing* 321). The fact that Girija’s ghost turns up in Apo’s story indicates that the boundaries of the seemingly separate wholes are, in fact, fluid in several respects. As Ghosh notes in terms of the novel’s overall structure, “[t]he story line unravels through amazing

swathes of time and space, embracing characters of the here, now and not-now, with all these elements conjoined in unfathomable ways” (n.p.). Not only is it the case that the stories of characters who are still alive extend into the following wholes, but the boundary between the world of the living and the world of the dead may be transgressed as well. Hence, even though the structure of four separate wholes that exist next to each other at first sight implies that each character’s existence is limited to their assigned space, the network that is situated within has the potential to expand endlessly and to cross the boundaries of these wholes.

### **An Infinite Network Expanding beyond the Universe**

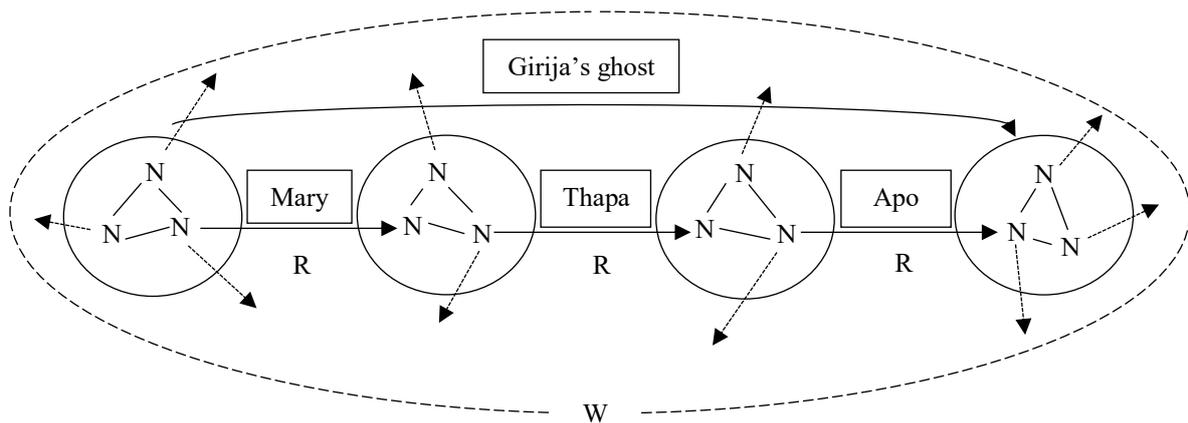
As the network is capable of endless expansion, it is not surprising that it also includes the stories of characters that have already left this physical world to establish new connections between the world of the living, the world of the dead, and potentially the entire universe, as the very last chapter of the novel once more indicates. As the narrator reveals,

[i]t is the hour when the moon and the sun are both visible in the sky, and the night itself is flirting with the dawn. The Drakpos call it the Hour of Courtship. The sun and the moon are the most ancient of lovers. Though there are more than a thousand moons and satellites in the solar system, the sun, if truth be told, is only drawn to her. The centre of the universe longs to withdraw from it all by crawling into her crater, like an ocean resting in the womb of a shell. [...] The universe itself is a mute witness. It has seen them spend aeons together as inseparable lovers, and eras as hostile strangers stuck in the same solar system. Each fortnight, the lovers’ quarrels reduce the moon to a quarter of her size. Each fortnight, love gives her renewed strength. But it is at this hour that everything is in equilibrium. (*Latitudes of Longing* 325)

In the previous chapter, the last one focusing on Apo and Ghazala, Apo suggests that they both take the pills his friend Thapa had once given him as they might apparently help them have sex. Ghazala is surprised at this suggestion, telling her husband off: “You talk of transience and sex, and you don’t even know you cannot bend” (*Latitudes of Longing* 324). The last chapter, however, implies that a union beyond the confines of the physical body is possible, not only for Apo and Ghazala, but for anyone. As the last paragraph of the novel states after the creation of an equilibrium due to the union of the sun and the moon,

[i]t is at this magical hour that a primal thought enters the ancient womb. A new world is conceived, entirely different from this one. And in this new world, there are no stars, satellites, planets, constellations and celestial dust to litter space. Devoid of tectonics, evolutions and all other inexorable transitions, emptiness is all that exists. An emptiness outside the reach of this expanding universe and the relentless grip of time. And within it, the possibility of you and I. (*Latitudes of Longing* 325-26)

The final passages of the novel allude to a space where “you” and “I” and all other beings could potentially exist and that may lie beyond the physical world and even the entire universe. This idea is emphasised by the novel’s arrangement of forms; the structure of the novel with its four wholes implies that even though we might think that everyone inhabits a separate space with fixed boundaries, there is the potential for expansion beyond these boundaries and the physical world, visualised by the employment of a network that passes through the four wholes and expands beyond their confines. Hence, the novel examines both the interplay between humans, nature and other external influences in the physical world they live in and its embedding into the universe and the emptiness that may lie beyond it. The novel’s formal set-up therefore implies that all of the elements of the large network are, in fact, part of one large whole, potentially the entire universe, that connects all of the various fragments and opens up new worlds unknown to humans in their physical form.



## 5. (Un)reliable First-Person Narration between Truth and Imagination

The three novels that will be analysed in this chapter feature first-person narrators whose stories weave a web of truth and imagination, laying bare how the human mind and memory work. Raj Kamal Jha's debut novel, *The Blue Bedspread*, employs a narrator who continually drifts off into old memories of the past and is carried away by his vivid imagination in an attempt to alter the most unpleasant and traumatic stories of his childhood, placing special emphasis on the blurry line between memory and imagination. The narrator of Tabish Khair's *Night of Happiness* is also frequently carried away by his imagination as he is confronted with the impact of his prejudices against his Muslim employee, whose life story he is retelling. As reviewer Ragini Mohite observes with regard to Khair's protagonist, he "is visibly discomforted when his assumptions about his employee are challenged and goes on to reveal his hidden biases" (n.p.). Like *The Blue Bedspread*, Jha's *Fireproof* also places emphasis on the act of remembering, gradually uncovering the traumatic memories the protagonist's mind is trying to suppress. As Christoph Senft notes, this narrator's "journey is an act of expiation and confrontation with trauma and repression, in which he is forced to admit to his deeds and experience feelings of guilt, loss, hatred and pain" (147).

In order to demonstrate how the three novels visualise these complex workings of the human mind and the process of remembering in particular, it will be necessary to analyse the effects that are created when different forms meet, for instance when the novels' predominant first-person narration switches to third person and is, in the case of *Fireproof*, also supplemented with multimodal features. As Laurie Vickroy points out with reference to trauma narrative in particular, "[w]riters have created a number of narrative strategies to represent a conflicted or incomplete relation to memory, including textual gaps (both in the page layout and content), repetition, breaks in linear time, shifting viewpoints, and a focus on visual images and affective states" (29). Such strategies indicate clashes of forms that follow different rules and have a specific impact on the reader, who is asked to engage more actively with the narrative. These clashes additionally have the potential to generate a sense of instability and a web of uncertainties, particularly in the case of Jha's novels, providing no stable framework the reader could cling to. This also visualises the fact that the narrators lose control of their narratives to varying degrees as they are confronted with, or even overwhelmed by, their guilt, their pricks of conscience and the traumatic memories they are unable or unwilling to face. The following analysis will therefore mainly focus on the effects that are created when harmonising

and clashing forms interact with each other, referring to the specific forms Levine proposes in her study.

### **5.1 Changing Memories: Raj Kamal Jha's *The Blue Bedspread***

Raj Kamal Jha was born in Bihar in 1966 and grew up in Calcutta. He is currently the Chief Editor of *The Indian Express* and has written five novels so far, earning him the nickname 'The Novelist of the Newsroom.' Rajni George notes in this context that, "[a]s Chief Editor of one of India's finest newspapers, Jha plays midwife to the stories of the nation, from pitch through to broadsheet. In the middle of this cycle, or perhaps running parallel to it, appear his own stories, very much a product of the world of the newsroom even as they necessarily stand apart from it: the product of a dreamer and a realist, both" (n.p.). In fact, what is observable in all of Jha's novels is a strong sense of social criticism, often paired with elements of magical realism. While his debut novel, *The Blue Bedspread* (1999), primarily focuses on trauma and domestic violence, *If You Are Afraid of Heights* (2003) and *She Will Build Him a City* (2015) explore the deep social divisions in present-day Delhi and a few other places. *Fireproof* (2006) and Jha's latest work, *The City and the Sea* (2019), even focus on real-life incidents while displaying strong magical realist tendencies.

#### ***The Blue Bedspread: An Overview of Content and Form***

Raj Kamal Jha's debut novel is made up of a series of unfinished stories, written by an unnamed, male narrator who one night receives an unexpected phone call from a hospital, informing him that his sister has died in childbirth and that he is supposed to take care of the baby daughter until her adoptive parents pick her up the next morning. After taking the baby home, the protagonist and first-person narrator of the novel starts writing down a number of stories for his niece to read when she has grown up, "hoping to give the baby a past and his own life some coherence" (Kapur n.p.). These stories are, in fact, incomplete memories of the narrator's and his sister's childhood, which depict, apart from a few happy moments, mostly scenes of violence, abuse and incestuous encounters. As Alex Barley notes, "[t]hese stories represent a psychic geography portraying the internal psychological world of the narrator through the acts of writing and telling" (131). All of the stories are addressed to the baby girl, who is sleeping on a blue bedspread in the room next door while her uncle is eager to finish his tales before sunrise and the adoptive parents' arrival.

Structurally speaking, *The Blue Bedspread* is made up of six larger units, each of which is in turn divided into several short chapters and vignettes, “saturated with images as delicate and short-lived as snowflakes” (Magarian n.p.). The first unit, which comprises the chapters that take place after the hospital’s phone call, is unnamed, whereas the following five are called *Father*, *Mother*, *Sister*, *Visitors*, and *Brother*. The units, chapters and vignettes are only loosely connected, do not follow any discernible rhythm and appear to be unfinished, gradually creating a horizontal network of stories that leaves the reader with a lot of uncertainties and unanswered questions. As reviewer Akash Kapur argues in this context,

[t]hese are stories only in name – like the novel itself, many of them have little narrative unity or direction. But what they lack in structure, they more than make up for in mood. Each episode is like a dream, a gently contoured moment from childhood or urban life obscured in the vapor of the aging narrator’s imperfect memory. The narrative is hesitant, shy: it is full of self-conscious references to its own authorship; its vocabulary is one of ‘maybe,’ ‘perhaps,’ of the ‘truth’ that ‘lies somewhere in between.’ (n.p.)

The various clashing forms and separate elements of the network that can thus be identified in the novel are further characterised by frequent changes of perspective and tense, conveying a strong sense of fragmentation to the reader, who might initially hope to be able to assemble the separate pieces into a coherent whole. Additionally, some of the stories the narrator is telling seem to be based on true memories, whereas others seem to be completely imaginary constructs. He therefore creates two different types of elements within the network that become more and more indistinguishable in the course of the novel. However, they do finally not merge to create a whole but remain part of one large network that could potentially be extended endlessly. The fact that it is impossible to create a sense of wholeness contributes to the impression that the act of remembering, which is central to the novel, is not straightforward or fully reliable. In fact, the structure of the novel reflects upon the way human memory works, indicating that it is a complex and non-linear process. Barley adds that “[t]his literary technique used by Jha demonstrates the slipperiness of memory and the ambivalence of home, as well as the creative properties of narrative and storytelling in casting and recasting new and alternative realities” (132). Hence, this also makes it difficult for the reader to follow the protagonist’s narration and to assess his reliability. In terms of memory in particular, Charlotte Linde additionally notes that “[t]he term ‘memory’ is most commonly used, but ‘remembering’ is a better description of the act of using language to represent the past” (1). Hence, “[r]emembering is an act; memory is a term that describes either an ability or a storehouse. Whatever the neurological basis of memory may be, as soon as a story or other account of the past is produced, for an audience, or for the rememberer alone, an act of remembering is happening” (Linde 1). The protagonist of

*The Blue Bedspread* is caught in such an act of remembering, actively reconstructing the past for his niece. As Linde also adds, “[b]oth narrative and memory are constructed. Memories of what is understood to be the same event change over time, as the person changes, and in response to the responses of audiences for the story” (1). The fact that memories are unstable constructs that may change over time is also emphasised by the narrative techniques employed in the novel. In fact, the novel constructs, and reflects upon, the narrator’s complex act of remembering, and the reader soon realises that this is not a straightforward process compatible with linear storytelling. Additionally, in the course of the novel, it becomes increasingly difficult to assess which of the narrator’s stories are based on true memories and which are purely made up. Hence, there is an increasingly blurry line between the memories and stories that may unknowingly change over time, and those that are changed deliberately by the narrator, propelling readers into a web of uncertainties and unanswered questions. Even though the narrator does not seem to be fully in control of the network of stories he is weaving, he establishes a narrative hierarchy as he is the creator of all of the elements of the network. These elements remain mostly unfinished and do therefore not convey an impression of wholeness, neither in the course of the narrative nor at the end of it.

### **A Network of Memories**

Before readers are gradually drawn deeper and deeper into this web of uncertainties, the narrator writes down several stories that help him reflect upon some of his childhood experiences and thus starts to establish a clear narrative hierarchy. For instance, at the beginning of the second larger unit, *Father*, the narrator remembers going to a *Stammering Clinic* with his father shortly before his seventh birthday, an incident that points to the traumatic quality of some of his memories and must be understood as one of the first elements of the loosely connected network the narrator creates:

‘What do you see?’ the doctor asks.

‘There’s a streetlamp,’ I say. ‘And there’s an empty road. There are small houses on either side. They are colored red, green, blue, silver, and yellow. Each house has two windows and a door.’

‘Who do you think lives there?’

‘People,’ I say.

‘What kind of people?’

‘Rabbits and bears, pixies and gnomes like in the storybook where the faraway trees whisper *wisha wisha wisha* at night.’

‘Good boy,’ she says.

It takes me half an hour to say all this and by the time I'm done, I have fallen off the chair, I lie on the carpet, my chest hurts, my ears are burning, my eyes are wet with tears. [...]

It's a July afternoon, three days before my seventh birthday, the rain's coming down in sheets so thick that the black umbrella buckles under its weight. We are traveling in a taxi, my father and I, to the doctor, who has her office in a white building on Russell Street near Jamuna Cinema. (*The Blue Bedspread* 27-28, emphasis in the original)

The narrator does not remember the scenes of this presumably unpleasant event in the right order; the most traumatic and exhausting parts come to his mind first, before he is able to remember when the event actually took place and how he got to the clinic, with the gaps and blank lines between the different scenes visually setting apart his single snippets of memory. As the narrator recounts the incidents in the order he remembers them, he deviates from conventional storytelling with a linear plotline. The dialogue with the doctor is even presented in direct speech, which underlines the vividness of the narrator's unpleasant memory. The fact that this event must have had an almost traumatising impact on him is emphasised when he later remembers the conversation with the doctor once more:

She brings out a book, a brightly colored book. It must have been printed in a foreign country, since the colors are bright and sharp, the pages so smooth they reflect the light from her table lamp.

'What do you see?' she says.

There's a streetlamp, I say, and there's an empty road. There are small houses on either side. I stop, my chest heaves, I can feel the breath driving through me like an express train. They are colored red, green, blue, silver, and yellow. I am trembling now, Father is looking at me one moment, at the table lamp the next. Each house has two windows and a door, I say. (*The Blue Bedspread* 30)

The fact that he narrates the same scene again in a slightly different version supports the assumption that traumatic memories may keep haunting the victims, making it difficult for them to forget the actual incident. Additionally, it demonstrates on a small scale that, as Linde has pointed out, memories are unstable and may change over time. In this respect, the narrative strategies employed in *The Blue Bedspread* are similar to those of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, published two years earlier. Roy's novel also depicts the effects of traumatic incidents on two little children and confronts readers with a similarly fragmented plotline. Brinda Bose also notices the parallels between the two novels, arguing that "[o]ddious as comparisons always are, this one is inevitable: Arundhati Roy's *Twins* shocked us, surprised us, mesmerised us, they moved us and they touched us. It was indeed a tough act to follow, and it is not even a comment on Jha's story-telling limitations that his Brother and Sister are finally unable to do the same" (n.p.). As there are also parallels in terms of narrative technique, the

ideas Elizabeth Outka outlines in her essay on the experience of trauma in *The God of Small Things* may be transferred to Jha's novel as well. With reference to the fragmented plotline of Roy's novel, Outka argues that "traumatic events may, strangely, be both erased from memory and yet return repeatedly as flashback" (26) and that "[f]or most of the text [...] the reader must experience these fragments much as the characters do, as memories out of context that bewilder and unsettle" (30). The stories that the narrator of *The Blue Bedspread* writes down for his niece and that gradually extend the network also have the potential to unsettle the reader as most of them are unconnected, depict deeply traumatic incidents, and are randomly remembered by the protagonist. Barley adds with regard to the novel's structure that

[t]he stories, rather than providing linear narrative with beginnings, middles and endings, adopt a postcolonial aesthetic [...], subverting story-telling conventions, linked as [...] loosely connected stream-of-consciousness recollections of the narrator's childhood. *The Blue Bedspread* has a mixed atmosphere of fear, menace and oppression both within the home and outside in the city of Calcutta. (130)

However, it would be too simplistic to interpret the fragmented structure of *The Blue Bedspread* only as part of a postcolonial or postmodernist aesthetic. In fact, just like Roy's novel, *The Blue Bedspread* demonstrates that "[t]rauma reorders time itself, and thus [...] the temporal mixture must be read not simply as a feature of a postmodern or postcolonial narrative, but also as the sign of traumatic experience" (22), as Outka points out (with regard to Roy's novel). Joanne Lipson Freed describes the features of trauma narrative in more detail, noting that "[Leslie Marmon Silko's] *Ceremony* and *The God of Small Things* not only describe trauma but also reproduce it through formal strategies such as fragmentation and repetition that create a reading experience not unlike the experience of traumatic memory" (226). Similar strategies are also observable in Jha's novel; the narrator tries to overcome the traumatic and recurring memories of his childhood by writing down the unpleasant stories, which he even states explicitly at the end of the chapter *Stammering Clinic*:

And perhaps it was on that rain-flooded afternoon, when I turned back to look at the white building on Russell Street for the last time, that I understood what seems to be the most important lesson my father taught me: when you find it difficult to say something, when the words get trapped in your chest, your lips quiver, as in winter, you can always write it down. That's why, my child, I have nothing to worry about tonight, I am prepared. (*The Blue Bedspread* 32)

The narrator's conclusion draws attention to the fact that he is in charge of the narrative and hopes that the writing process will have a therapeutic effect on himself, meaning that it is therefore not his sole intention to inform his niece about her dead mother. Additionally, he is shocked by the unexpected death of his beloved sister and, not knowing how to cope with the

situation, deliberately escapes into memories of the past, even though they are also unpleasant. In fact, as Kapur argues, “the narrator is struggling not only against a failing memory but against an aversion to memory, an unwillingness to revisit his painful past” (n.p.). Nevertheless, he feels the necessity to dive deeper into this unpleasant past, remembering another traumatic childhood incident in the chapter *One Rupee* and therefore extending the network of loosely connected memories: “Bhabani, the maid, and I are standing outside the door which Father has locked from the inside and we can hear him beating my sister. Someone is on the bed, someone is on the floor. The person on the bed is running, I think it’s Sister because the creaks are gentle. The bed is very old, my sister says Mother got it from her father when she got married” (*The Blue Bedspread* 33). As in the previous chapter, the incident is narrated in present tense, indicating that the narrator vividly relives the scene during the writing process. On the next few pages, he reveals the reason for his father’s outbreak of violence. He, the narrator, forgot to hand a one rupee coin, the change he had received from the bus driver that day, over to his sister. When he later noticed the coin in his pocket, he did not remember that it was the change from the bus driver and threw it away on the nearby playground since his father had told him that he is not allowed to carry money with him (cf. *The Blue Bedspread* 38-40). At home, his father gets furious when he notices that the money is missing, concluding that it must be the sister’s fault:

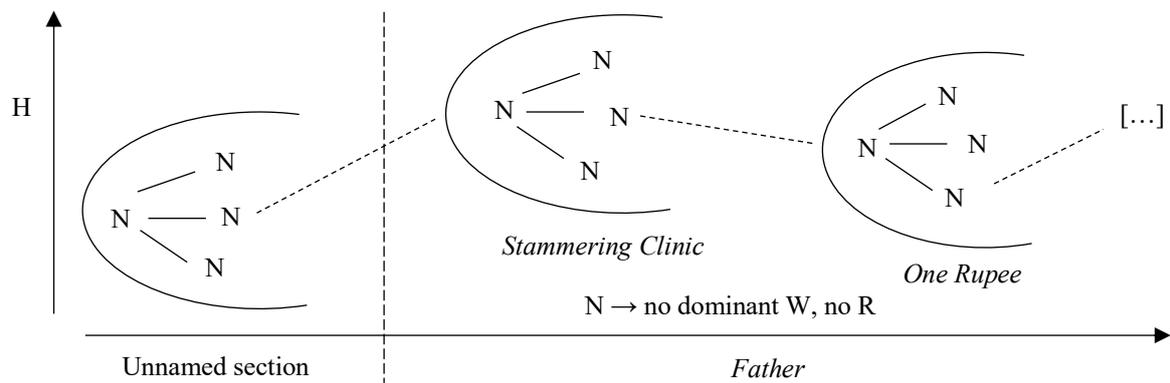
‘Where is the one rupee?’ Father said and my sister said she didn’t know. Father got angry, angrier.

First, he slapped my sister, like he often does. A slap on her cheek, my sister is a very, very brave girl and she never cries when Father beats her. This makes Father more angry and he beats her harder but she just stands there, like a statue, until he gives up and says that his hands hurt.

But this time Father got very angry, he kept on shouting and Sister went to the next room. He followed her and locked the door from the inside, Bhabani heard and came running from the kitchen. A few minutes later, we heard the noises coming from that room, Father’s angry shouts and my sister running, dodging him as the slaps fell on her. (*The Blue Bedspread* 40)

There is another switch to present tense within the same paragraph, describing the scene in more detail: “She runs, she crashes against the dressing table and the powder box, the combs fall, we can hear the sound. Bhabani shouts that one rupee is not such a big thing and she tells Father to stop because everybody in the building can hear him. She says that if he doesn’t have any love, he should at least have some shame” (*The Blue Bedspread* 40). The narrator is drawn so deeply into the memory that his narration switches to present tense, conveying the immediacy of the situation to the reader. Additionally, this time, he describes the incident he had already mentioned at the beginning of the chapter in more detail. He relives the scene again and seems

to lose control of the story he is telling. Additionally, even though the snippets of memory that occur within one chapter are usually concerned with the same incident, the connections between the different chapters and hence the different elements that make up the narrator's network are mostly unclear. For instance, after the incident taking place in the clinic, the following chapter about the one rupee coin starts in medias res, depicting how the narrator's father is beating up his sister. There is no clear connection between the various elements of the network, conveying the impression that he is not fully in control of his stories, which also makes it increasingly difficult for the reader to assemble the various pieces into a coherent whole.



Barley additionally notes in this context that “[w]hilst this causes the reader some confusion, it is a narrative technique that demonstrates the process of memory as moving constantly from thought to thought” (132), including a few happy ones. As Surendra Narayan Jha adds, “[h]aving such a painful past, he still tries to trace all the happy moments of his own family that altogether covered the period of thirty years. For, he sincerely wishes to offer a suitable answer to the child’s future question regarding her own identity” (137). In the unit called *Sister*, for instance, the narrator recounts the pleasant event of playing a game with his sister at night: “Our eyes still open, we pull the blanket over our heads, stretch it tight, turn over on our sides so that we face each other. And then we look at the light refracted through the woolen fabric. It’s a blue yellow orange red light, a strange glow that you see only in the movies. We then imagine that we have built our own light garden, its floor the blue bedspread [...]” (*The Blue Bedspread* 100). At the end of the chapter, the narrator addresses the baby directly, letting her know why he found it necessary to tell her this story in particular:

We played this game for quite a few winters until we found that we were growing bigger and bigger, the blanket, after we were covered, couldn’t reach far enough to be held high and tight, the garden then grew smaller and smaller. But I needed to tell you this little story, my child, so that when you have to pull your blanket over your head, remember that with a little bit of imagination, you can always find some love trapped in some fear. (*The Blue Bedspread* 101)

It might be striking to the reader that the narrator is able to draw such profound conclusions as the novel's overall structure rather conveys the impression that he is not fully in control of the narrative. The same is the case when the narrator concludes that he should forgive his father at the end of the chapter in which he reveals that his father had abused him at the age of ten after finding out about the incestuous encounter between him and his sister (cf. *The Blue Bedspread* 50-57). Nevertheless, the narrator concludes the following in a mature manner: "I want to tell him that what happened happened and it's been selfish of me to keep using him as an excuse for failures of my own making. Or as a subject of my prose. I want him to help me understand why he failed as a father and how so much hatred and pain could have gracefully coexisted with so much love and joy" (*The Blue Bedspread* 57). As in the chapter about the garden game, the narrator draws a mature conclusion, giving rise to the assumption that even though the novel appears to be fragmented as he keeps moving randomly from memory to memory, he is able to keep up the narrative hierarchy he has established and is aware of what he is writing. However, the sense of fragmentation is emphasised once more when he addresses the day of the pujas in the chapter following the one about the garden game, two stories that are not connected at all. Nevertheless, both of them are at least set during the narrator's childhood, whereas the one that follows the chapter about the pujas is set during his adulthood, presenting his sister lying in the maternity ward of a hospital after a miscarriage. Hence, there is a bigger leap in time between these two scenes, which once more emphasises the fact that the act of remembering does not follow any linear pattern. As memories of the narrator's childhood are suddenly followed by memories of his adulthood without any obvious connections, it turns out that the novel's network structure reflects upon the non-linear process of remembering, which would not be compatible with conventional storytelling techniques to the same extent.

### **Connections between the Past and the Present**

This is further emphasised in the chapters with headings printed in italics. Even though it is not possible to make out a specific pattern or rhythm in the novel's structure, there is one chapter in each unit whose heading is printed in italics. At first sight, there seems to be no obvious reason for this choice, but, on closer examination, it is at least noticeable that these chapters display a stronger connection to the present moment than most of the others, even though they also include memories of the past. In fact, this structural set-up draws attention to the way human memory works and how the mind makes connections between past and present events in a non-linear fashion. It further reflects the narrator's efforts to focus on the present without

becoming drowned by memories of the past completely. The first of these chapters is called *Still Life* and takes place shortly after the narrator has picked up the baby from the hospital. When the narrator looks at the baby, he is reminded of his sister and drifts off into a memory of the past: “I bend down to look at you closely, the fragrance of your new life comes rushing to me, I blow gently on your two-day-old hair, you still don’t move. You are like your mother. When she slept, it was as if she had walked into a photograph and then never came out of the glass frame the entire night” (*The Blue Bedspread* 23). The narrator’s memory is triggered by an image he encounters in the present, which demonstrates, on a small scale, how the process of remembering works.

The chapter of the next unit with a heading in italics is called *Street Crossing*; after openly revealing that he is scared, the narrator tells the baby that “[t]his is a story about a man crossing a street. He may not be a young man, his stomach may droop over the belt of his trousers, but look at him walk to the bus stop every morning and you can make out that he knows his city, so casually he crosses the street” (*The Blue Bedspread* 65). It later turns out that the man is the narrator himself; the chapter describes his present situation, providing an insight into the narrator’s feelings and fears as he is seemingly overwhelmed by his responsibility for the baby and his grief for his dead sister. At this point, he is drawn back into the present moment after a series of childhood memories, but it is easier for him to express his feelings of loneliness and isolation when he describes himself in the third person as an external observer.

The chapter of the third unit is called *Sarah Parker*, referring to a woman who had opened the Mesmeric Institute in Chowringhee (cf. *The Blue Bedspread* 84). The narrator is reminded of her when the baby does not stop crying, but he continues writing his story anyway, revealing at the end of the chapter that he wants to “begin to finish the story about the night snow fell in [...] [their] neighbourhood [...]” (*The Blue Bedspread* 87). This also implies that there is a connection between the present and the past, even though the recipient does not (yet) get to read what the narrator has actually written.

The chapter *Straight Line* of the fourth unit does not seem to have a clear connection to the present moment at first sight; the chapter focuses on three items in particular: a washbasin, a black iron hook and a brown hinge, which are positioned in a straight line if you look at them from a specific angle, as the narrator observes (cf. *The Blue Bedspread* 134). However, the items that are mentioned in the chapter in separate passages still exist in the flat at the time of the protagonist’s narration. In fact, the narrator connects specific memories to the three items, thus once more demonstrating how the process of remembering may work: “First Point: *It’s evening, still too early for the neighbor’s TV set to laugh and sing. The sky is the six o’clock*

color, between blue and purple. Sister is standing at the washbasin, the tap's running, I can hear the soap" (*The Blue Bedspread* 135, emphasis in the original). He connects a specific, unpleasant incident to this image; one evening, his sister had prepared for a night out at the cinema with her friends but was not allowed to go: "Father looks at the ticket and laughs, Sister smiles, he tears the ticket in two and laughs harder, he teeters for a while, tries to balance himself by holding my sister's shoulder and suddenly his face changes, he's not laughing anymore, he's making a face as if he's in pain. And he throws up what I think he had for lunch" (*The Blue Bedspread* 137). The second item, the iron hook, is connected to a happier memory as a birdcage with pigeons his father bought for his sister was hanging from it (cf. *The Blue Bedspread* 138). The three items taken together imply a strong connection between memories from different time periods and the present:

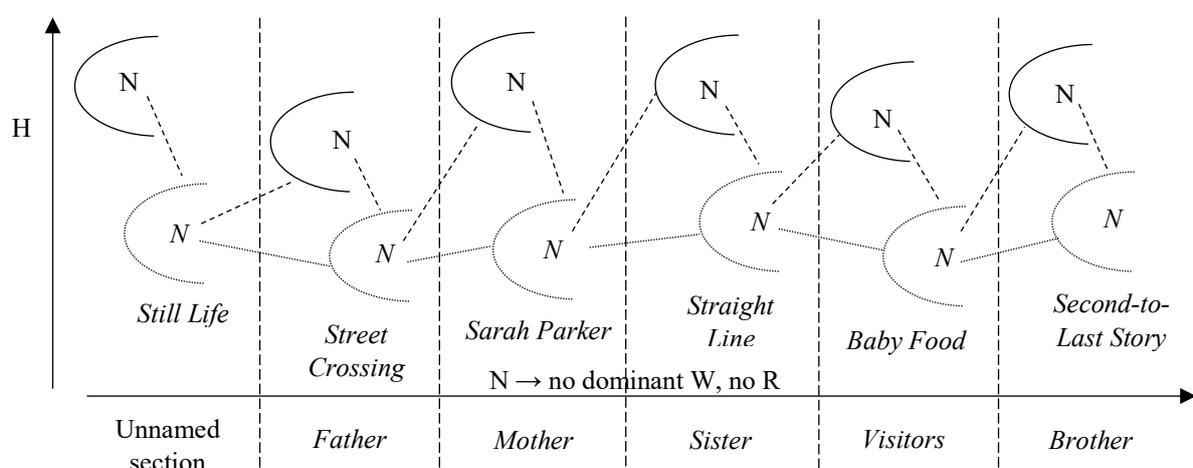
Third Point: *Father's gone, Bhabani is gone, I am so tall now that the washbasin comes to my waist, Sister's hair is still black and beautiful, the iron hook is still there, but the cage is gone, the birds where I don't know. Your mother and I are leaning against the bedroom door, her left hand is on the hinge, her right is in mine, a nor'wester blows but the rain has stopped, the smell of wet earth and the wind run their fingers through her hair, there is a power cut outside, the sodium vapor lamps are switched off and we can, in the dark, see the stars. For some strange reason, even the garbage heaps have been cleared, the tramlines glint, it's like in happy stories and movies, the neighborhood is as pretty as it should be when a brother and a sister meet again, for one day and half a night, for the first time in fifteen years.* (*The Blue Bedspread* 141, emphasis in the original)

The items first remind the narrator of his childhood and then of the day he and his sister met again for the first time in fifteen years.

The chapter of the fifth unit, *Baby Food*, focuses on the narrator's present concerns with his niece. After noting that there is "not much in the fridge," the narrator remembers that "[o]nce upon a time we had the Calcutta Milk Corporation Van, white and blue, dented, strips of steel bent and jutting out, but it came tearing down the street as if it were brand-new" (*The Blue Bedspread* 166-67). However, this time, he does not drift off into old memories but moves on to imagine how he will prepare the milk the next morning: "I shall boil this milk; I've seen mothers on TV test the milk against their wrists, I shall do the same and when it's cool, when I am sure it won't hurt your lips, I shall feed you the milk [...]" (*The Blue Bedspread* 168).

The chapter of the sixth unit, called *Second-to-Last Story*, presents the narrator's decision to keep the baby instead of giving her to her adoptive parents, who are supposed to arrive the next morning. In this chapter, the narrator does not drift off into memories at all but focuses entirely on the present and the future with the baby: "I shall call Mr. Chatterjee, tell him that he doesn't need to wait anymore, the man and the woman will surely find another child

somewhere in this city of twelve million [...]. So it will be me who will take you to the Alipore Zoo, to the Birla Planetarium” (*The Blue Bedspread* 203). Even though the six passages are not directly linked to each other, they stand out as they all create connections between the past and the present and continually take the narrator back to the current situation. Hence, in addition to demonstrating how the process of remembering works, they indicate how closely connected memories of the past and the present are and that it is not possible to separate the two completely. Hence, all of the six passages are part of the network the narrator creates and therefore counteract the impression that it is possible to draw neat lines between the past and the present, and between the different memories that are presented in different chapters.



### Adding Elements of Imagination to the Network

However, this reflection upon the complex process of remembering is undermined by the fact that the narrator changes some of his memories deliberately or makes up stories that may not be true at all. These stories must be understood as different types of elements within the same network. It already becomes clear at the beginning of the third chapter of the novel that the narrator has a vivid imagination when he tells the baby girl he has just picked up from the hospital that,

*[b]efore we make our first trip to the past, let us go to the future, to a day, many years from now, when you are in a room with several people. As soon as you turn, maybe to get a glass of water or to look out of the window, they point you out with their eyes, which say:*

*Don't you know she is the one who came out of her mother's womb, leaving her mother dead?*

*Do you know who brought her from the hospital? Her mother's brother, who didn't even cry that night. Not one teardrop? No.*

*Unknown to them, you see what they say.*

*Will you keep your back turned, angry and hurt? Or will you put on a smile, walk straight into their waiting arms, into their trap of pity? I don't know.*

*All I know is that in this city of twelve million, if six or seven, even ten people, say words that hurt, they are a speck in the ocean. Wait for a while, the moon will slide into the right place, the clouds will gather, there will come a tide and with it a wave that will wash this speck away. (The Blue Bedspread 16-17, emphasis in the original)*

In this passage, the narrator imagines a situation that might take place in the future, before starting to write his stories of the past. As Ketaki Datta points out in this context,

Jha swings between the past and present and again jumps forward to the future in his narration. The time frame is so flexible that it is somewhat confusing what the writer is actually aiming at. The narrator has lost his memory and when he gets it back sporadically he tries to talk about the birth of the girl-child who was born of his love for his sister and the cremation of his sister when the girl steps into her adolescence. (30)

The narrator believes that the scenario he imagines could potentially take place at some point in the future and also expresses some uncertainty as he admits that he does not know how the girl will react upon hearing the gossip about her dead mother. Hence, the concerns expressed in this passage, which is printed in italics and therefore visually set apart from the other passages of the chapter (which are either set in the present or in the past), do not appear to be unusual. It realistically portrays the concerns and worries of a person who has just lost a beloved relative and finds himself in an exceptional situation. However, it may already be an oblique indication of the narrator's vivid imagination and ability to make up stories that are not true. This impression is emphasised in a chapter of the unit *Father* in which he deliberately alters a scene that he had to witness during his childhood on a daily basis and therefore adds an element of imagination to the network:

It's the image of a child lying on his stomach in a tiny garden, his elbows making two hollows in the damp earth, his fingers pressed like sepals against his face. There's no one beside him, just a parallelogram of light that falls on the grass from a large window. Who this child is, it's not clear, all I know is that this story will have a happy ending.

I close my eyes and concentrate so hard they prise free from the sockets and I let them fly across the room. [...]

My eyes pass over the child to that two-inch gap between him and the wall and there I can see a large window with the wind billowing the curtains. It's late at night and the child is lying on his stomach in the tiny garden [...].

He cannot make out what his parents are saying, Father's head is lowered, perhaps he is reading aloud. Mother interjects with a laugh but Father goes on. [...]

The curtains continue to rise and fall, the wind still blows in a steady breath, but now Father is standing close to Mother, the book still in his hand. The child watches the hand rise, Mother not move, the book come crashing against her head. She lurches back, half stumbles, balances herself. (*The Blue Bedspread* 44-47)

The child the narrator describes seems to be himself, meaning that he once more chooses to describe himself from an external perspective in this scene. As Barley adds with reference to the same text passages, “here identities in the stories are constantly shifting between a child and an adult, and from location to location. The reader is made aware that the narrator is manipulating the stories” (131). He changes the stories deliberately and tries to keep his distance from the narrated scene as it is presumably hurtful to him, which he also indicates in the following passage:

I could tell you more about the child, more about that night, what happened when the child returned to his room. How long it took for him to fall asleep and when he did, what dreams he dreamed. But those are frills, details needed merely to fill the blanks of my memory. As of now, however, let’s not waste time, let us look forward, perhaps a few months later, at the child as he lies on the upper berth of an express train speeding through the night, knowing full well that this is one night his mother is safe. (*The Blue Bedspread* 47-48)

The only way out of his misery is to imagine a scene that might take place in the future and that must therefore be understood as one of the network’s elements that are formed by his imagination. As Barley argues in this context, “he recreates the scene of that night observing his parents from the garden. This time he is in the parental role, married and living in the same house with his wife and children. Exactly the same scene replays [...]. However, the narrator deliberately takes control and changes the ending to a happier one rectifying the power imbalance in favour of his father and turning it in favour of himself” (131). Barley refers to the following text passage:

I could end the story here, but that would leave it forever trapped in the past, incomplete and purposeless. So let’s imagine that the child grows up, leaves this city, travels to faraway places, meets people, falls in love, gets married, and returns to live perhaps in that same house with the tiny garden in front. [...] He reads aloud to his wife; outside, their child lies on his stomach in the garden, staring at the window [...]. They have an argument, their voices rise. And this time, Father gets up, puts the book on the table, his shadow on the wall, walks first to his wife, kisses her on the nose, she makes a face, smiles, and then he walks to the window, calls out to the child, pulling his little family into a world he has only now begun to explore. (*The Blue Bedspread* 48-49)

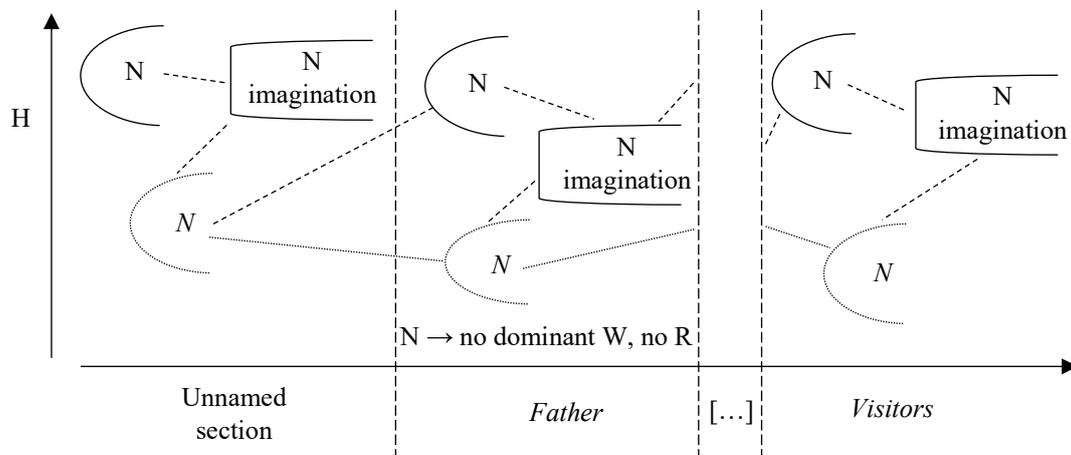
The narrator thus takes advantage of the narrative hierarchy he has established, flees into an imaginary world and is sure that he will behave differently when he has a family of his own. The scene therefore emphasises the blurry boundaries between the narrator’s memories of the past and his tendency to be overwhelmed by his imagination. Hence, it already becomes difficult at this point to keep the two seemingly different types of elements of the network apart. Additionally, the fact that none of the scenes are written in the first person indicates that he prefers to function as an external observer who tries not to get emotionally involved in the

situation, even in the one with the happy ending. One of the reasons for this choice is that the narrator does not seem to be able to draw a clear line between his cruel father and himself as he also refers to himself as ‘Father’ in the version with the happy ending. Barley also points out that “[...] at one moment the protagonist is the narrator, at another he is a child, and at another he is a father. This shows that the now-adult narrator is able to manipulate and alter stories at will and suggests that he is deliberately trying to repress the more uncomfortable aspects of his childhood. The novel thus demonstrates the power of narrative to recreate reality, manipulate memory and rewrite history” (131). The ability to narrate such a story with blurry boundaries between reality and imagination further points to the protagonist’s potential unreliability, which increases as he continues weaving his tales of the past. His ability to create stories that are not true due to his vivid imagination and his attempts to suppress the unpleasant memories of his childhood are also demonstrated in a chapter about Bhabani, the family’s domestic help. The day she is leaving the family’s home, she asks the narrator to tell her a story, and he responds that he knows how she came to this city, which makes her laugh as it is apparently impossible to know. Nevertheless, the narrator gives it a try, telling her the story in the second person and thus adding more elements of imagination to the network:

‘Wake up,’ your husband says, ‘wake up.’ His hand is on your shoulder, he’s shaking you hard. You open your eyes, the sari, bright yellow with red flowers, has slipped off your head, you draw it back, there’s a Stranger standing three feet in front of you, near the door, brushing his teeth. Your neck hurts, you sat all night on the floor of the 19 Up North Bihar Express, your back against the wooden frame of the corridor, your head bent to one side, your left ear pressed against your shoulder the whole night. (*The Blue Bedspread* 149)

He continues this vivid narration for a few more pages, and when he is finished, Bhabani states that the story is not entirely true but that she is interested in who the stranger he has mentioned might be (cf. *The Blue Bedspread* 153-54). It is the only story of the novel that is written in the second person and followed by a brief reflection on whether the incident might really have happened like that. Bhabani is directly involved in the conversation and questions the authority of the narrator, even though it is clear that he is only a little boy with a vivid imagination. Additionally, she does not reveal the real story of how she came to their home as she does not seem to find it important, preferring to encourage the boy’s imagination. However, the conversation and Bhabani’s reaction must actually also be written by the narrator himself, which once more demonstrates that the novel provides no stable framework the reader could cling to. Instead, the fact that the series of stories is an unreliable construct by the narrator with increasingly blurry boundaries between truth and imagination, and hence between the two

different types of elements within the network, is emphasised more or less explicitly throughout the whole novel.



### From First to Third Person: More Elements of Imagination

The fact that some of the chapters are not written in the first but in the third person further supports the assumption that the narrator changes some of his memories deliberately and thus adds elements of imagination to the network, which makes him appear increasingly unreliable. The passages of third-person narration, which might at first sight be interpreted as an attempt to provide a genuine insight into the other characters' minds, expose the narrator's manipulative tendencies on closer examination as these stories are all based on the narrator's subjective retellings and imagination. There are passages in which this circumstance is not addressed explicitly, for instance when he tells the story of how his mother got up one night to take a walk through the snow:

Mother gets up in the middle of the night, I can remember the sound, the blanket rustling, she moving, her feet touching the floor, she goes to the bathroom and on her way back, after she pulls the flush and the gurgling in the tank dies down, after she switches off the lights, maybe she hears it. At first, it seems like a medley of several noises. The muted roar from a cricket stadium, the noise of rain falling and then it gets softer. [...] The snow is there wherever she looks, covering the tram tracks, all the way to where Main Circular Road meets Grey Street, where the flour mill is. The snow covers the film posters on the lampposts [...]. (*The Blue Bedspread* 76-77)

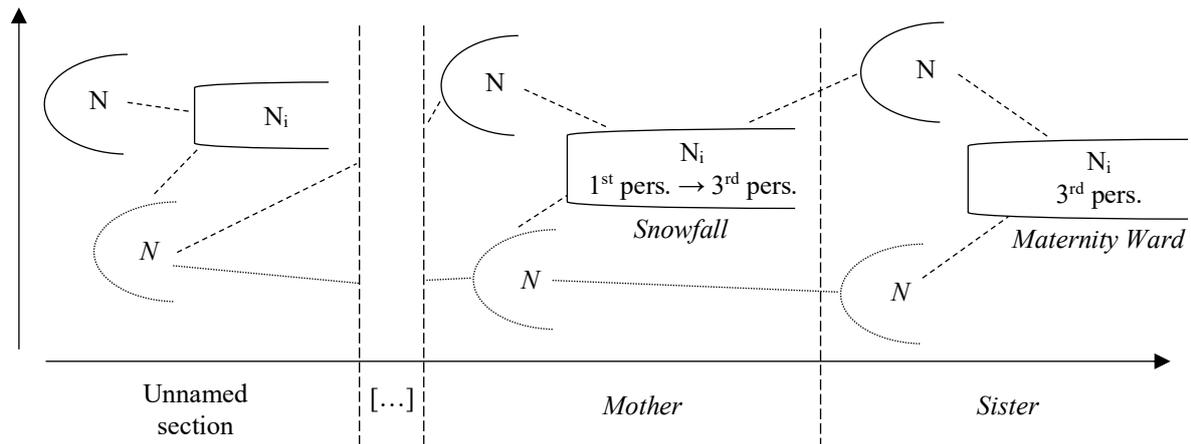
What is striking is the gradual shift from the narrator's perspective at the beginning of the chapter to that of his mother. The first-person narrator slowly disappears, giving way to a third-person narration with internal focalisation, which once more has to be a construct of his imagination as his limited perspective does not allow him to look into other characters' minds. This indicates that it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between the two different

types of elements that make up the network. At the end of the chapter, the narrator implies that the story about his mother is his own retelling, noting that “[s]he tells us the story for the tenth time but it doesn’t matter and we all laugh, Father holds Mother closer to him, my sister puts her hands in mine and we hold on to each other, the air trapped between our clothes, asking all the gods we know not to let the snow melt. White in the dark” (*The Blue Bedspread* 81).

A similar strategy is employed in the chapter *Maternity Ward*, depicting his sister in hospital after a miscarriage. The chapter seems to present the perspective of his sister, which is likely to make readers wonder how the narrator is able to reproduce her thoughts. Additionally, this time, the narrator is completely absent and does not even introduce the chapter:

The glass window is large, the drapes are gray and heavy but she’s pushed them aside, there was a bit of a problem, since one of the hooks, the little white plastic hooks that move along the curtain rod, got stuck. She tugged, tugged harder, one hook gave way, snapped. It fell to the marble floor. She turned, looked around, just in case someone was watching, but there was no one, who knows whether this is damage to hospital property? But the damage helped, one hook gone, the drapes glided to the left. (*The Blue Bedspread* 107)

The passage is told by a third-person narrator, which implies that the protagonist apparently retells his sister’s story from her perspective. However, this is an almost impossible scenario since he is highly unlikely to remember all of these details if she really told him about her experiences in the hospital at some point in the past. The other option would be that the passage is narrated by a second, omniscient narrator. However, this case would also be problematic since the protagonist makes it clear at the beginning of the novel that he is the one who is going to write down the stories for his niece and therefore establishes a clear narrative hierarchy. What is even more striking is that he is able to retell his sister’s memories of a time when he was not even born. His sister apparently remembers that “[t]he last time, the only other time she was in a hospital, was at her grandfather’s place in Deoghar, which she visited every Durga Puja. Must have been very long ago because the baby brother hadn’t come into the family yet [...]” (*The Blue Bedspread* 111). The narrator seemingly grants her the room to report her memories of the accident she had as a child throughout the whole chapter, even though it must actually be written from his perspective. Only in the very last sentence, the narrator sneaks back into the narrative, making it clear that he is still in charge of the network of stories: “And like the darkness in her room that flows out of the window and merges with the darkness of the city, she can feel, for the first time since her miscarriage, long before you ever came, that she is not alone” (*The Blue Bedspread* 119). The narrator’s appearance is inconspicuous and only noticeable as he directly addresses the sleeping baby his stories are directed to.



When the following chapter starts in medias res, the narrator has disappeared again. Even though there is a vague connection between this chapter and the previous one, it is not clear right away who the characters, particularly the male one, are: “‘That’s the hospital, over there,’ he points out. He points to a strip of white, far away, over her head and her shoulders, across the trees, the clusters of houses, to the left of the plume of gray smoke rising in the sky from some roof, to the right of the white marble dome of the Victoria Memorial” (*The Blue Bedspread* 120). As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that the male character is the husband of the narrator’s sister. They sit on the terrace of their house shortly after her miscarriage and he blames her for losing his child: “‘Get me another drink,’ he says. ‘That’s the least you can do.’ ‘Yes,’ she says and she turns” (*The Blue Bedspread* 124). At this point, the narrator appears for the first time in this chapter, asking the baby what kind of ending she would like to hear: “‘How should we end this story? We could have her go down to get him the second drink, hear the crackle as it hits the ice in the steel glass, climb the stairs again and listen to him talk about the school, the child she couldn’t give him” (*The Blue Bedspread* 124). Without even considering this first option, he decides that they should, in fact, end the story like this:

*She returns with the drink, he doesn’t even hear her footsteps, he’s looking out, far away, at the lights on Park Street and she walks closer toward him, the glass in her hand. She bends down, puts the glass on the terrace, she will need both hands, his back is turned, the first drink must have blunted his senses, since he can’t hear or feel that she is only two feet away. Suddenly there is a scream which no one will hear, a body, dressed in a white shirt and gray trousers, white socks and black shoes, falls into the lane that not many people use since it’s more like a dumping ground, choked with garbage from the buildings nearby. Dry garbage, the kind that doesn’t begin to smell and, therefore, need not be cleared in a hurry: old newspapers, scraps of iron and broken furniture. So no one hears the body fall except for a cat that scurries away in fright. (*The Blue Bedspread* 124-25, emphasis in the original)*

The fact that the passage is printed in italics, just like the one about the baby's future from the beginning of the novel, suggests that this incident might not be true and must thus be understood as an element of imagination within the network. However, the narrator, who is presumably jealous of his sister's husband, is eager to opt for this ending, embellished with vivid details. Additionally, it once more demonstrates that the narrator is in charge of the narrative, even though he disappears several times, seemingly granting the characters of his stories room for their own perspectives. Further, this may make readers wonder how much truth there is in the stories he is narrating.

Several parts of the novel are even told with zero focalisation and do not present the perspectives of specific characters. For instance, the suicide of a man who lived in the narrator's neighbourhood during his childhood is seemingly told by an omniscient narrator:

*They found him in the morning, 5:30 or so, hanging from a hook on the bedroom ceiling where his fan should have been. His walking stick was on the floor, the chair he had climbed on lay upturned, its four legs marking a rectangle in which his body swung gently, like that of a lamb, upside down, at a butcher's shop. The police came around seven, in a red-and-white jeep; a red light on the roof that didn't work; a constable got up on the chair, held him tight with one hand, loosened the blue nylon rope with the other, lowered him down. 'He's very light,' he said. 'He's so old he would have died anyway, why did he have to kill himself?' he said. [...] They took it all away, leaving behind nothing to mark the fact that once upon a time there lived an old man. And that for a week or so, he changed the life of a little girl, brought joy into her house and filled her little heart with some love. (The Blue Bedspread 91-92, emphasis in the original)*

This story is the first one that appears in the unit called *Sister*. It is also printed in italics, but, this time, there is no reason to suggest that the incident might not have taken place as it seems to be the sad and real ending of the story the narrator tells next:

Once upon a time, there lived an old man who worked in an oil-refining mill, pasting labels on tin cans, just before the oil was poured into them [...]. There were twelve pigeons in the cage, six gray, six white, the prettiest things in the neighborhood. And although there were several pigeons out in the open, resting on window ledges, cooing in the afternoon, fluttering in the narrow lanes and doing pretty things like grooming their feathers, or sleeping, people stopped by to look at these dozen birds in the cage. (The Blue Bedspread 93-94)

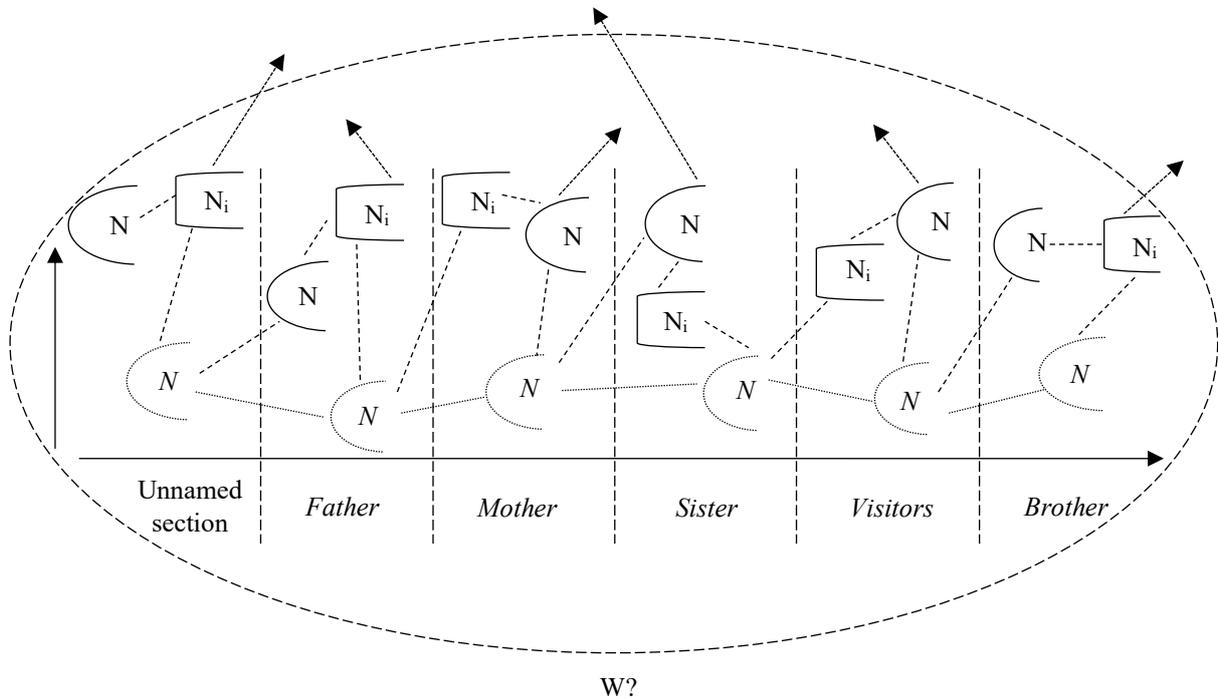
One day, one bird escapes from the cage and is killed by a tram, which the narrator reveals later on in the same chapter. The little girl, in fact the narrator's sister, witnesses the incident while standing on the balcony of their nearby house (cf. *The Blue Bedspread* 98-99). At the end of the chapter, the narrator appears, noting that “[o]ur story will, after a while, move across the street, over the manhole, over the reddish-brown stain, into the girl's house, and from there into her heart, in one straight line” (*The Blue Bedspread* 99, emphasis in the original).

Considering the fact that the baby's uncle is the narrator of all of the network's stories, this last statement of the chapter must also be his, even though it sounds like the observation of a narrator who is truly omniscient and in control of the whole narrative. Even though the baby's uncle also seems to be in control of the separate stories, which he emphasises when he comments on his storytelling techniques at the end of many of the chapters, he does not attempt to connect them into a coherent whole, instead leaving the reader with an unfinished network that contains both real memories and imagined stories. The reader is thus deliberately left with a lot of uncertainties and loose narrative strands, rendered by a highly unreliable narrator who is unable to cope with the traumatic memories of his childhood and overwhelmed by the current situation he finds himself in.

### **Achieving Closure?**

In the last chapter, the narrator reveals a shocking secret that might create at least some sort of closure, but, due to his potential unreliability, it is difficult to assess whether it is true or not. He imagines revealing the secret to a large crowd in Eden Gardens, the words being scattered throughout the chapter: "So the first word he says is *I*, it floats all around the stadium, brushes against the faces of the people he knows, the strangers he has seen who look at him, through the haze, the second is *am*, his lips open and close [...]" (*The Blue Bedspread* 208, emphasis in the original). The full sentence reads: I am the father of my sister's child (cf. *The Blue Bedspread* 208-209). As Barley points out, "[t]his sentence of eight words is enunciated slowly, emphasising the precise meaning of each word. In saying this sentence, he is admitting to the ghosts who haunt him (represented by the familiar faces in the crowd) that he is not the baby's uncle but her father" (137). Whether this is the truth or just the narrator's vivid imagination remains unclear. There are hints throughout the novel that his final revelation might indeed be true, but there obviously is reason to suggest that these hints might also be wrong. In the end, there is no way of telling how reliable any of the stories of the network the narrator addresses to his sister's child are. The passages written in the first person might present his true memories, whereas those written in the third person are more likely to be retellings of stories he might only vaguely remember, or completely imaginary constructs. However, it becomes increasingly difficult in the course of the narrative to keep the two different types of elements of the network apart as they do not follow any specific, reliable patterns. They are eventually indistinguishable within the network, which could be extended endlessly by the narrator, who is unable, and potentially unwilling, to provide answers to all the open questions. This structural arrangement

demonstrates that the narrator's memories and imagination cannot be neatly separated, and that acts of remembering involve complex, non-linear processes that could not be reflected upon in the same way when employing more conventional storytelling techniques.



## 5.2 Fleshing out Facts: Tabish Khair's *Night of Happiness*

“Although many of Khair’s themes remain the same, [in recent years] the emphasis has shifted to a more global perspective, probably because of the increased tensions that developed between the West and Islam. His focus shifted from India to the world outside” (*Rewriting India* 171), as King points out. This is particularly observable in Khair’s *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position* (2012) and in *Just Another Jihadi Jane* (2016), which focus on Muslim characters living in Denmark and the UK respectively. In his latest work, *Night of Happiness* (2018), however, his focus shifts back to India, exploring prejudices and religious tensions between Hindus and Muslims in particular.

### *Night of Happiness: An Overview of Content and Form*

Khair’s short novel tells the story of how Anil Mehrota, a successful Hindu businessman, grows suspicious of one of his Muslim employees and therefore hires a detective to investigate his

past. The suspicion that something might be wrong with Ahmed first arises in Mehrota when he is invited to his employee's flat on the day of Shab-e-baraat, a Muslim festival also known as 'Night of Happiness.' After entering the flat, Ahmed pretends to talk to his wife, who is preparing halwa in the kitchen, but he later returns to his boss with two plates that do not contain any of the traditional dish, and Mehrota is shocked when Ahmed nevertheless pretends to dip nimkis into the non-existent halwa. Mehrota senses that something must be wrong with Ahmed, fearing that he might suffer from a mental illness that could affect his other employees, or that he might even have fundamentalist attitudes. He therefore talks to Devi Prasad, a private detective who starts investigating Ahmed's personal circumstances and provides Mehrota with detailed reports on his findings. It turns out that Ahmed does not have any fundamentalist background but has been traumatised since his wife got violently killed during the Gujarat riots of 2002 and pretends that she is still alive. Unsure how to deal with this circumstance, Mehrota decides to dismiss Ahmed, giving him the chance to return to the company after one year and successful psychological treatment. Shortly before the year is over, Ahmed sends Mehrota a box of halwa and nimkis. When Mehrota drives to Ahmed's flat, intending to give him a box of chocolates in return, the neighbours tell him that Ahmed committed suicide a few days ago. Upon hearing this news, Mehrota is shocked and subsequently checks into a nearby hotel. Overwhelmed by his guilt, he decides to write down the story and to leave the manuscript in the drawer of the hotel room for strangers to read.

The main section of Khair's novel, which is supposed to be the manuscript Mehrota has written, is divided into seven chapters that are in turn divided into several short episodes. This manuscript must be understood as one whole whose pieces are gradually assembled by Mehrota in the course of the narrative. Ahmed's personal background story, which Mehrota receives in the form of a detective's report, forms a separate whole within the whole of the manuscript. When Mehrota retells the most important aspects of Ahmed's life on the basis of the report he has received, he starts fleshing out certain points, extending Ahmed's whole and blurring the line between true facts and his own additions. This structural arrangement of the novel, which gradually leads to a blurring of the lines between truth and imagination, places emphasis on how the human mind may work, exposes the narrator's lack of knowledge of Muslim culture and makes it easier for the reader to identify with his situation. The formal arrangement of two wholes that exist within each other therefore effectively reveals the prejudices Muslims might be exposed to in Indian society.

### The Frame Story: Transgressing the Border of Fictionality

The text of the manuscript is preceded by a frame story in which an unidentified, omniscient narrator addresses the readers, telling them to imagine that they are the stranger who enters the room and reads Mehrota's manuscript. This frame story, which must be understood as an independent form that introduces Mehrota's manuscript, is written in the second person and immediately draws readers into the fictional world:

You enter the room. Who are you? You could be anybody. Maybe you are a businessman or a CEO, passing through this teeming North Indian city, and staying for a night in one of its five-star hotels. You could be a prosperous doctor attending an international conference, or an ordinary tourist from Denmark or the US, splurging on this room for a night or two after tramping the heat and dust of Indian streets. [...] You could be *almost* anybody. It does not matter who you are, as long as you are the kind of person who can pause and read in English, or why you are here in this five-star hotel room. What matters is that you open the first drawer of the glass-topped teakwood cabinet next to the bed, the drawer in which copies of the *Bible* and the *Bhagavad Gita* are kept. There, under the copies of these two books, seldom read in this room, you discover reams of paper filled with a minute and neat handwriting. (*Night of Happiness* 1-2, emphasis in the original)

The omniscient narrator makes it clear that *almost* anyone who enters the room may read the manuscript, knowing that only specific groups of people are privileged enough to stay in a five-star hotel and to have a good command of English, most likely business people or rich tourists from abroad. In fact, their social status and attitudes might resemble Mehrota's, the author of the manuscript, who hopes to find a listener who is able to understand his thoughts and actions. The writing of the manuscript and the knowledge that somebody with similar attitudes might read it afterwards is therefore a way to appease his guilty conscience. The narrator further explains what this stranger is supposed to see when taking out the sheets:

You take out the sheets, perhaps only to throw them away. But your attention is caught by the first page: there is a title on it that intrigues you, partly because it has been crossed out. And then, there is a stanza that you might vaguely recall from your schooldays. It is a manuscript of some sort. The writing reaches out and catches you by the sleeve. You feel its desperate tug. You start reading ... (*Night of Happiness* 2)

This frame story immediately draws readers into the fictional world, arousing their curiosity and making them feel as if they really find themselves in the described situation. This impression is further enhanced by the next page, which indeed displays a title that has been crossed out and a stanza of the ballad *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge:

~~THE SPECTRAL INFINITUDE OF  
SMALL DISTANCES~~

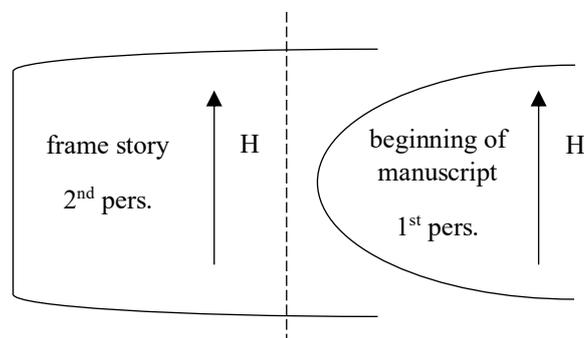
They groan'd, they stirr'd, they all uprose,  
Nor spake, nor moved their eyes;  
It had been strange, even in a dream,  
To have seen those dead men rise.

*(Night of Happiness 3)*

Readers are surely surprised by this beginning of the novel and may spend some time on making sense of the title and its relation to the stanza that follows. As Mohite notes in this context, “Khair opens the novel by directly addressing the reader and his unnamed narrator is the mariner holding the reader captive with his glittering eye and fascinating story” (n.p.). The beginning of the novel thus transgresses the border of fictionality, first making readers feel as if they are part of the textual world and then encouraging them to think about this unusual beginning of the manuscript, which, in the following, presents an investigation that will haunt them just as much as it haunts the narrator.

**Starting the Manuscript and Establishing a Narrative Hierarchy**

After readers have been prepared for Mehrota’s story in the frame section, they are presented with the actual manuscript on the following pages. The narrative hierarchy the omniscient narrator has established during the frame narrative is now broken down as Mehrota takes over control as a first-person narrator and hence establishes a new hierarchy. The fact that the manuscript is written in the first person and employs an episodic plot structure facilitates readers’ identification with the protagonist and their perception of him as a reliable narrator.



The manuscript’s opening lines, which prepare the reader for the whole Mehrota is gradually assembling, sound like the beginning of a conventional story that starts in medias res: “The sky had been a deep blue some hours earlier, but it was a gunnysack now, grimy and weighted with rain. Just Ahmed and I were left in the office, as was usually the case on such late evenings”

(*Night of Happiness* 5). At the beginning of this first chapter, Mehrota additionally tells the reader how he came to hire Ahmed, revealing that he had been the only Muslim applicant for the position and that he “was also prepared to reject him” (*Night of Happiness* 8), already indicating that he is prejudiced against Muslims. However, when he notices that Ahmed’s résumé says that he speaks several unusual languages due to his previous job as a tourist guide in Bodh Gaya, he changes his mind (cf. *Night of Happiness* 9-10). Mehrota continues to describe his relationship with Ahmed, stressing the fact that he is a humble and polite employee who has never asked for anything, “not even for a raise, though naturally [...] [he] had given him many raises over the years” (*Night of Happiness* 13). However, it becomes clear that Mehrota is unable to accept the fact that Ahmed, a Muslim, is apparently such a humble, quiet and hard-working person. At the end of the first chapter, Mehrota drives Ahmed home as it is the day of Shab-e-baraat, the Muslim festival Ahmed celebrates with his wife every year (cf. *Night of Happiness* 16-18).

The second chapter, which adds even more pieces to the whole Mehrota has started to create, begins with a description of the neighbourhood Ahmed lives in before the two men reach Ahmed’s flat (cf. *Night of Happiness* 19-20). The fact that the chapter is divided into several short paragraphs places focus on how closely Mehrota pays attention to his surroundings and how eager he is to observe all the details, gradually emphasising the impression that he is not as open-minded towards other cultures as he claims. More precisely, whenever a new paragraph starts, a new thought or a new scene is introduced, placing emphasis on Mehrota’s subjective observations and reactions to the current situation. As Avantika Mehta adds in her review of the novel, “[t]o have the voices of Hindu men tell a Muslim’s tale is a carefully thought-out decision on the author’s part. Ahmed’s story is being told through his employer’s omissions, lack of knowledge about Islamic culture, and presumptions” (n.p.). In the flat, Ahmed first asks Mehrota to sit down on the sofa while he intends to check whether his wife needs help in the kitchen. The next paragraph describes Mehrota’s first impressions of the flat: “I looked around. There was a large laminated poster of puppies with the usual mushy slogan – I forget what – above the sofa, and two photographs on another wall. One of the photos was of an old woman, and I did not have to be told this was Ahmed’s Ammajaan [his dead mother]” (*Night of Happiness* 25). The fact that there is a change of scenes that resembles a cut in a film places special emphasis on Mehrota’s subjective perspective. When Ahmed returns with two plates from the kitchen that contain nimkis but no halwa, Mehrota first assumes that Ahmed must have forgotten the latter:

Ahmed may have simply forgotten, in his hurry not to detain me longer than necessary, to put halwa – that famous maida ka halwa he always talked about – on my plate! I was going to bring this to his notice with a joke; I glanced up at Ahmed, who was busy eating. My jokey remark was aborted by the sight of the plate that Ahmed was holding. There was no halwa on it either! Only, as was the case with my plate, a pile of nimkis and a stainless-steel spoon. (*Night of Happiness* 33)

After this observation, there is a new paragraph, which starts with Mehrota's reaction to this confusing situation as he notices that Ahmed pretends to dip his nimkis into the non-existent substance: "Can you imagine how taken aback I was? Yes, the sense of foreboding returned at that instant: It is one thing to forget to put something on a plate you are serving and another to not notice its absence on your own plate!" (*Night of Happiness* 33). Mehrota addresses his readers directly, emphasising his superior position and trying to make them understand how shocked he was when the incident occurred. Readers are supposed to identify with the situation, and the fact that Mehrota's exclamation is put at the beginning of a new paragraph places special emphasis on it in visual terms. The short break and the empty line between the two paragraphs are enough to intensify the sense of shock and surprise that Mehrota is trying to convey to the reader. Afterwards, Mehrota continues to describe this situation at the table, wondering what he should do and repeatedly expressing his bewilderment, which slowly turns into anger (cf. *Night of Happiness* 34-35). Additionally, he pays attention to every single detail of Ahmed's actions and feels as if the situation will last forever. This impression is conveyed successfully to the reader as discourse time in large parts of this paragraph equals story time:

He put down the spoon, picked up a nimki, dipped it in the part of the plate that was bare, and then carried it to his mouth. He chewed, he swallowed. Then he grasped the spoon again, this time to scoop up empty air from the vacant part of the plate and 'eat' it, his jaws and throat muscles moving exactly as if he was chewing and swallowing. I was filled with a sense of horror, horror of the sort I had never experienced or imagined. At that moment, Ahmed looked up from his plate and saw me staring at him, my plate inert in one hand. (*Night of Happiness* 34)

The scene resembles a close-up shot in a film that aims to appeal to the audience's emotions and forces them to pay attention to every single detail of Ahmed's grotesque action. After some time, Mehrota even feels insulted and humiliated: "Also, what if this was not just some hidden craziness, but a deeply subconscious bid of Ahmed's to humiliate his boss? I could not know. I did not wish to know" (*Night of Happiness* 36).

In the next paragraph, Mehrota additionally notes that "[t]ime had slowed down even further in that tawdry flat with its pool of water next to the open window. The seconds and minutes were flies and tiny insects stuck on the edge of a cauldron of boiling molasses, which is one of the images that have stayed with me from the only time I visited some remote villages

[...]” (*Night of Happiness* 36). He describes his perception of the situation by referring to a visual image that comes to his mind, emphasising his impression that the situation will last forever. The fact that this memory is placed at the beginning of a new paragraph visually underlines Mehrota’s assessment of the disconcerting situation he got himself into. He is more than relieved when he is finally able to escape from this grotesque situation and to head to his wife’s dinner party. The whole evening, he keeps wondering how he should react to the incident and what he should do about Ahmed (cf. *Night of Happiness* 39-44).

At the beginning of the next paragraph, he admits how difficult it is to divert his attention away from his thoughts about Ahmed: “These were the thoughts occupying me when the missus wended her way back to me, accompanied by a couple of young writers she was championing that season” (*Night of Happiness* 44). Shortly afterwards, there is another scene change that interrupts Mehrota’s thoughts about Ahmed: “My wife took me by the arm and hustled me to one of the sofas, as the cluster gravitated to the dais. Florid speeches were made, but mercifully – perhaps because it was a function organized by a commercial publishing house and not an official institution – they were short” (*Night of Happiness* 45). The episodic plot of the first few chapters, which provides the first few pieces of Mehrota’s whole, quickly switches from scene to scene, marking the breaks between passages that focus on Mehrota’s thoughts and passages that describe his environment. This arrangement successfully reflects how much Mehrota is consumed by his thoughts about Ahmed and how difficult it is for him to focus on what is actually happening around him. In this context, Mohite points out that “[t]he novel is itself a sparse narrative, forsaking all else for its primary plot line, one that is as singularly obsessed with its investigation as the mariner with his tale” (n.p.). Additionally, the scene changes convey an impression of authenticity as Mehrota writes the manuscript retrospectively and therefore only remembers the most striking situations in a slightly impressionistic fashion. The plot structure therefore also emphasises the fact that it is normal to remember certain episodes from one’s life better than others and to place emphasis on the most striking and moving ones.

The episodic plot therefore draws the reader’s attention to those incidents that reflect Mehrota’s growing restlessness and eagerness to find out more about Ahmed. As the manuscript is a way of appeasing his guilty conscience, Mehrota initially focuses on the moments that fuel his endeavour to investigate his employee’s background, trying to justify his decision. He therefore takes advantage of the narrative hierarchy he has established, meaning that, as the narrator, he has the power to decide which incidents to report in order to make his point clear and to gradually create a sense of wholeness according to his subjective opinion. The day after the dinner party, he wonders whether he will “detect signs of madness in him [Ahmed], a glitter

in the eye, a fervor in the voice, a grasping of the hand, or would he still be as he had been for so many years: polite, considerate, orderly, reliable?” (*Night of Happiness* 51). In the paragraph that follows, Mehrota reports that Ahmed had already held the morning briefing that day, addressing the reader directly: “As you can imagine, I reached my office late. Ahmed had already held the morning briefing in our meeting room – it was his job in any case, though I usually liked to be present [...]” (*Night of Happiness* 51-52). This scene switch and the direct address help readers identify with Mehrota’s situation and convey the impression to them that it is not clear what to make of Ahmed. The episodic plot therefore interacts effectively with the homodiegetic narrative situation as Mehrota gradually assembles the first whole of the novel. The reader is made to feel Mehrota’s growing suspicion of Ahmed as the first-person narration is limited to his perspective, and the episodic plot forces readers to switch quickly from scene to scene, not granting them time to come up with their own image of Ahmed. Instead, they have no choice but to accept Mehrota’s portrayal of him. Mehrota starts imagining more things about Ahmed even though he has (almost) no reason to believe that he is mentally ill or has even planned a conspiracy against him. Mehrota notices himself that he starts imagining stories that might not even be true, which he admits when he is in the office, trying hard to focus on matters that are more important than Ahmed:

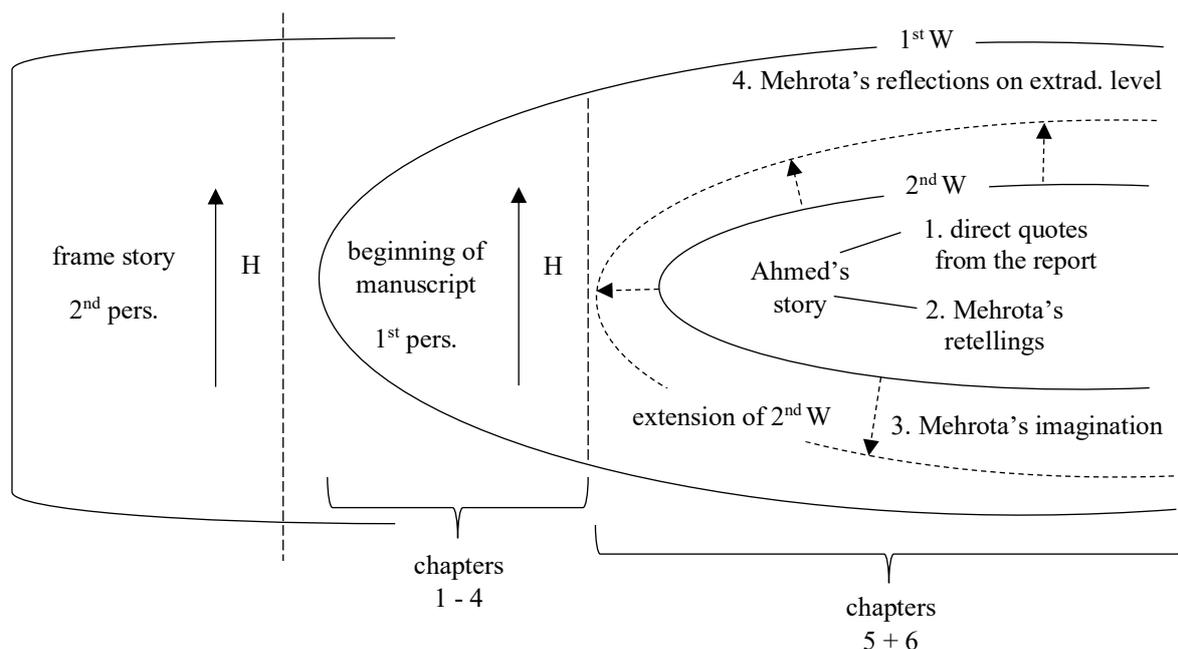
I switched on my computer and checked my email, answering a couple. I checked on shares and other matters. I perfunctorily read the reports sent in from other offices. But all these were mechanical acts. What I was really thinking of were the dreams, half-remembered, from last night, and, inevitably, the plate of nimkis – without halwa – at Ahmed’s flat. The more I thought of the plate, the more unreal it seemed to me. If someone had walked in and said to me, ‘Ah, you are back from Toronto – how was your trip?’ I would have welcomed it as the real explanation and slotted the experience at Ahmed’s flat as a bad dream I had while flying back! I was that desperate to wish it away. Then the thought struck me: this was so uncharacteristic of me! I was trying to hide behind stories, to construct fictions, instead of facing facts. I asked myself: how are facts faced? I knew the answer: facts are faced with evidence, with data, with numbers. Fiction cannot be numbered; it cannot be proved. But facts, yes, I have known it all my working life, I have built my business on it – facts can be proved. (*Night of Happiness* 52-53)

The passage reflects Mehrota’s dilemma and the fact that he notices that there is no point in being suspicious of Ahmed as long as he does not have any specific evidence. Additionally, it displays a metafictional dimension, raising the question of the difference between fact and fiction, and foreshadowing a blurring of truth and imagination, which lies at the heart of the following chapters. Ironically, Mehrota’s obsession with facts eventually leads to disaster as he is unable and unwilling to empathise with his employee and to put himself into his situation. Zaidi also notes in her review that, “[f]inally, this novel is an investigation into things that are

non-evident, that cannot be proved. Or perhaps, things that we'd prefer not to see. For, even after the narrator has the facts of his employee's life in a file, he struggles to accept Ahmed's reality" ("This Novel Reveals Things" n.p.).

### Ahmed's Story: A Whole within the Whole

In the fifth chapter, Mehrota starts retelling details from Ahmed's life as stated in the reports by detective Devi Prasad, establishing the intradiegetic level of the novel. Ahmed's story, which unfolds on this intradiegetic level, must be understood as a separate whole within the whole that is formed by Mehrota's manuscript. However, the boundaries of Ahmed's whole become increasingly blurry during the course of Mehrota's retelling in the fifth and in the following chapter as he gradually dissolves the line between truth and imagination. More precisely, four major types of forms can be distinguished in these two chapters: direct quotes from Devi's report, the passages in which Mehrota retells Ahmed's story on the basis of Devi's report, the passages in which he imagines scenes from Ahmed's life that might not have taken place that way, and the passages in which Mehrota reflects on his current situation on the extradiegetic level. These forms must be understood as the pieces that are added to the two wholes in the fifth and in the sixth chapter of the novel. While the first two types of forms are used to gradually assemble Ahmed's whole in a fairly objective manner, the other two lead to a subjective extension of this whole.



At the beginning of the fifth chapter, Mehrota first quotes passages about Ahmed's religious affiliation from the report:

Ahmed's father belonged to the Tableeghi Jamait. 'This is a small but thriving society among religious Muslims, which is best understood in terms of evangelism,' the report explained. 'These are Muslims who believe that the message of the Quran has to be spread, especially among other Muslims who, in their opinion, have forgotten it. In secular terms, one can describe the society as fundamentalist, but it is both pacifist and, unlike organizations like Jamait-e-Islami, not political. They see themselves as modern, not as traditional or fundamentalists. Their stress is on education and living an ethical life defined by Islamic precepts. While they insist on strict purdah in public, they also encourage women to get an education and seek respectable work.' (*Night of Happiness* 71-72)

The fact that Mehrota directly quotes passages from the report on Ahmed, the first type of the forms outlined above, emphasises the factual dimension of the opposition Mehrota has alluded to earlier and adds the first few pieces to Ahmed's whole within the whole of the manuscript. Mehrota considers the content of the report to be true as it is based on facts and interviews with people who know Ahmed or his family, even though, as Mehta notes with reference to the passage that states that Ahmed is no fundamentalist, "[t]his news does not allay the Hindu man's fears that Ahmed might be crazy and a danger to other employees. Neither does the fact that Ahmed has not, in seven years of employment, exhibited any signs of violent behavior" (n.p.). The line between truth and imagination already becomes slightly blurry afterwards when Mehrota starts retelling what is written in the report instead of inserting direct quotes. He therefore changes the pieces of information that actually make up Ahmed's whole and extends it in a subjective manner, which says more about himself than about his employee:

After being widowed, Ammajaan [Ahmed's mother] was not abandoned by the local members of the society. She was provided with support, mostly in the form of work such as knitting, stitching, weaving, some of which she had done in her spare hours in the past too. While she paid for Ahmed's education in the zilla school, society members took care of teaching him Arabic and Urdu. He went to a local mosque for his lessons. He was brought up as a proper little Muslim in the mohalla. I can imagine Ahmed at eight or nine, skullcap on his head, scampering along the narrow alleys of the mohalla – it was called Maruganj, said the report. I can imagine Maruganj. (Is it a gift that I have always had, or has it come to me, come to me after ...?) I tell myself I can imagine Maruganj because I have been to Muslim mohallas in bigger, older cities [...]. (*Night of Happiness* 72)

The passages in which Mehrota retells details from the report, the second type of the forms mentioned above, resemble an omniscient narration and therefore seem to add some more objective pieces of information to Ahmed's whole. However, when Mehrota reads and retells the facts stated in the report, he cannot suppress his imagination. Even though this is a normal

process to a certain degree, it is obvious that Mehrota is surprised about this apparent gift himself. In the following, he even starts making more assumptions about the place Ahmed stayed in, comparing it to places he has visited himself and presuming that

Maruganj in Phansa must have been dingier, dirtier, its alleys narrower, its sewers uncovered and overflowing, bearded men sitting in corners, children in skullcaps, shrouded women, the stench of decay and filth everywhere except when, suddenly, a different smell would drift by – the fragrance of burning incense or an appetizing whiff of one of the many kinds of kebab being skewered over an open fire. (*Night of Happiness* 72-73)

In this passage, Mehrota provides a detailed description of the place he has never been to but is able to imagine vividly. This passage of the third type of the forms outlined above therefore clashes with passages of the first type, which contain direct quotes from the factual report on Ahmed, and also with those of the second type, which are at least supposed to be objective retellings of the report. The passages of the third type therefore contribute to Mehrota's subjective extension of Ahmed's actual whole.

Mehrota's vivid description is interrupted by the remark that he "had been reading the report in bed" (*Night of Happiness* 74), which is placed at the beginning of a new paragraph. This interruption is nothing unusual and may even facilitate readers' identification with Mehrota. Readers are probably able to imagine the situation that they are reading a passage in a book that suddenly triggers old memories they may subsequently indulge themselves in. When Mehrota continues reading the report after a conversation with his wife about a Muslim expert they could invite to dinner, his first-person narration once more seems to shift to an omniscient one. At first, he asks readers in a direct address whether they can recall his "image of little Ahmed with tattered notebooks, a skullcap perched on his short-cropped hair, scampering down festering, murky alleys relieved by a flash of brilliance from an ancient doorpost or a whiff of kebab from a roadside stall" (*Night of Happiness* 78). He acknowledges that "this image was valid only up to a certain point" (*Night of Happiness* 78), before his retelling of the report once more seems to shift to an omniscient narrative situation: "Until secondary school, Ahmed played the part of a studious lower-middle-class Muslim boy, mugging up maths tables in school and Arabic at the mosque. In his spare time, he ran errands for his mother – mostly delivering and fetching her work [...]" (*Night of Happiness* 78). This seemingly omniscient narration is interrupted when Mehrota comments on a description of Ahmed offered in the report: "He was not talkative even then, but he was not reclusive either – and in that description I recognized Ahmed as we knew him in the office, a man who would speak when required but would not gossip, a man who was always friendly but did not seem to have any special friends"

(*Night of Happiness* 79). Mehrota's retelling of Ahmed's story is characterised by these frequent switches between different forms, which gradually blurs the boundaries between the objective pieces of information of Ahmed's whole and the subjective ones Mehrota is adding to it, reflecting both the workings of the human mind in general and Mehrota's eagerness to learn more about his Muslim employee in particular.

### **Blurring the Line of Ahmed's Whole**

At some point, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between Mehrota's subjective perspective and the seemingly objective facts of the report he is reading; the omniscient passages are occasionally interrupted by Mehrota's comments but he also disappears several times during the narration, which now also includes dialogues, blurring the line between truth and imagination even further:

The season Ahmed started working for Hanif Ustad was a bad one economically. A vague global crisis, like some jealous invisible god, had blighted businesses and salaries in Maruganj too: many members of the society had less to spare, and hence they gave less work to Ammajaan. It was this that might have induced Ahmed to start working for Hanif Ustad. Hanif had been asking Ahmed to join him for some time. 'I am very busy in Bodh Gaya during the season,' he had told Ahmed. 'You could take on those of my tourists who want to see Phansa and we will share fifty/fifty of whatever they pay.'

'Does anyone want to see Phansa?' Ahmed had asked seriously.

'Not many. But there are some loonies. I thank Allah for the loonies: they make better sense economically.' Hanif had laughed, chewing vigorously on his paan.

'Why me?' Ahmed had enquired.

'Ingliss,' Hanif had replied shortly, spitting a thin stream of paan juice six feet away into a nullah. Ahmed looked on admiringly. Ammajaan did not allow him to chew paan. Most of the society members frowned on the habit too. (*Night of Happiness* 80-81)

The passage indicates that there is a blurring between Mehrota's imagination and the facts that are stated in the report as the report is unlikely to contain so many details and long passages of dialogue. As Zaidi notes, "[w]hen he picks up the bare bones of a story, his mind does the trick of making it flesh. Partly through his own determined quest for logical answers, and partly through empathy, he comes to see what was thus far missing" ("This Novel Reveals Things" n.p.). Additionally, Mehrota does not comment on his retellings and also disappears almost completely in the following passages, conveying the impression that he is a covert omniscient narrator who has no doubts about the story he is delivering, just like the narrator of *The Blue Bedspread*:

It wasn't just English that helped Ahmed when he started working for Hanif. At first most of the tourists who came to Ahmed, via Hanif, were from other parts of India: very

few foreign tourists diverted to see the 200- or 300-year-old temples that existed in Phansa, and rarely did a European detour to the colonial graveyard where some ancestor lay buried, having survived the Crimean War but succumbing to malaria in Phansa. (*Night of Happiness* 81)

Ahmed's personal story is more and more intertwined with historical facts that might indeed be provided in the report. However, they are also intertwined with the passages that are based on Mehrota's imagination, thus making it increasingly difficult to assess which parts of the narration are true and thus add objective facts to Ahmed's whole. Additionally, Mehrota suddenly seems to be able to look into the minds of different characters, just like an omniscient narrator. For instance, he switches from Hanif's perspective to that of Ahmed's mother in the following passages: "Observing Ahmed's success with the Indian tourists – which, he was canny enough to realize, depended a lot on the boy's ability to pick up phrases from their languages in just a few days – Hanif started asking him to help out in Bodh Gaya, and sometimes even escort tourists to Rajgir and Nalanda" (*Night of Happiness* 81). The next paragraph focuses on Ahmed's mother, who "felt uneasy about this, mostly because some of her Tebleeghi acquaintances warned her against Hanif Ustad's 'influence'" (*Night of Happiness* 82). Mehrota's retelling of the report sounds like the story of an omniscient narrator, who has the ability to jump from character to character and to look into their minds. The reader is drawn into this literary illusion due to the detailed and vivid descriptions of these passages.

Towards the end of his retelling of Ahmed's story, Mehrota also makes it clear that he is in control of the narrative, thus emphasising the narrative hierarchy he has established. After narrating a scene in which Ahmed accompanies his mother to his father's grave and connecting it to a statement Ahmed had once rendered in the office (cf. *Night of Happiness* 104-109), Mehrota makes it clear to the reader that he has not forgotten about the story of Ahmed and his wife, Roshni, which he had been telling before his diversion: "You might think I have forgotten about that walk with Thubten, that my story has gone off in other directions, become involved in an intricate past. But that is not the case. Because, you see, that day when Ahmed asked his Tibetan friend Thubten to accompany him, he had made up his mind. He was going to ask Roshni to marry him" (*Night of Happiness* 111). Mehrota makes it sound as if he is indeed an omniscient narrator who is fully in control of the story he is telling. He explicitly calls his retelling of Devi's report 'his story' and is eager to reassure the reader that he has not forgotten to narrate an important part of the relationship between Ahmed and Roshni. Additionally, the circumstance that the way Mehrota retells the report starts resembling an omniscient narrative situation conveys the impression to the reader that he is a reliable narrator and that the conclusions he draws must also be considered true facts. The fact that the manuscript offers

detailed descriptions further has the potential to create a vivid image in the mind of the reader that is supposed to be taken as true. However, this arrangement of clashing forms exposes Mehrota's narrow mindset at the same time as the reader notices that there is indeed no reason to be suspicious of Ahmed. As Mohite notes, "[w]hile he adorns Ahmed's narrative with details, Mehrotra's own insularity becomes increasingly evident. He is uncomfortable in unknown and poorer neighbourhoods and needs his wife's assistance when he searches for a Muslim acquaintance within his own circle to question" (n.p.). On the other hand, readers may initially have the feeling that Mehrota's suspicions are justified and wait for an incident that finally exposes Ahmed's fundamentalist background, which Mehrota is eagerly searching for. However, it is also important to note that he sticks to the facts the report provides and only fleshes them out instead of imagining completely different scenes that depict Ahmed as a radical fundamentalist.

When Mehrota, who becomes more and more inconspicuous during large parts of his manuscript, reappears and comments explicitly on the fact that he might occasionally be carried away by his imagination (and therefore extends Ahmed's whole in a subjective fashion), it does not disturb the impression that he has turned into an omniscient narrator who is in control of the story. Instead, his comments and reflections on the extradiegetic story level even make it easier for the reader to imagine what Mehrota's situation must be like. For instance, after the observation about Ahmed's mother quoted in the previous paragraph, the story is interrupted by Mehrota's following comment:

Did she bring this up with Ahmed? The report did not say anything about it, but I suspect she did not do much. Maybe just a word to warn him against 'bad society', I could imagine that. From the way Ahmed spoke of his Ammajaan, on the few occasions that he did, I was convinced not only of the love between mother and son but of an unusual degree of trust – the kind of confidence in the other that is built up through years of mutual support and dependence. (*Night of Happiness* 82)

The seemingly omniscient report is all of a sudden interrupted by Mehrota's comment, which, on the one hand, disturbs the literary illusion readers are drawn into, reminding them of the fact that they are listening to Mehrota's version of the report instead of reading it directly. On the other hand, this does not necessarily lead to a destabilisation of Mehrota's reliability but rather conveys the impression that the subjective conclusions he draws could be considered objective facts as well. Additionally, and probably most importantly, the reader is able to identify with Mehrota's situation; any reader is probably able to imagine what it is like to hear or read about something and to have the feeling that the information provided is not sufficient or not detailed enough. This is why it is not surprising that, after retelling another passage from the report in a

truthful and seemingly omniscient manner, Mehrota admits the following: “The years passed like that. There is little the report had to say of them, and my imagination baulks at filling in the gaps” (*Night of Happiness* 85). Mehrota continues to add the following about his manner of retelling the incidents outlined in the report:

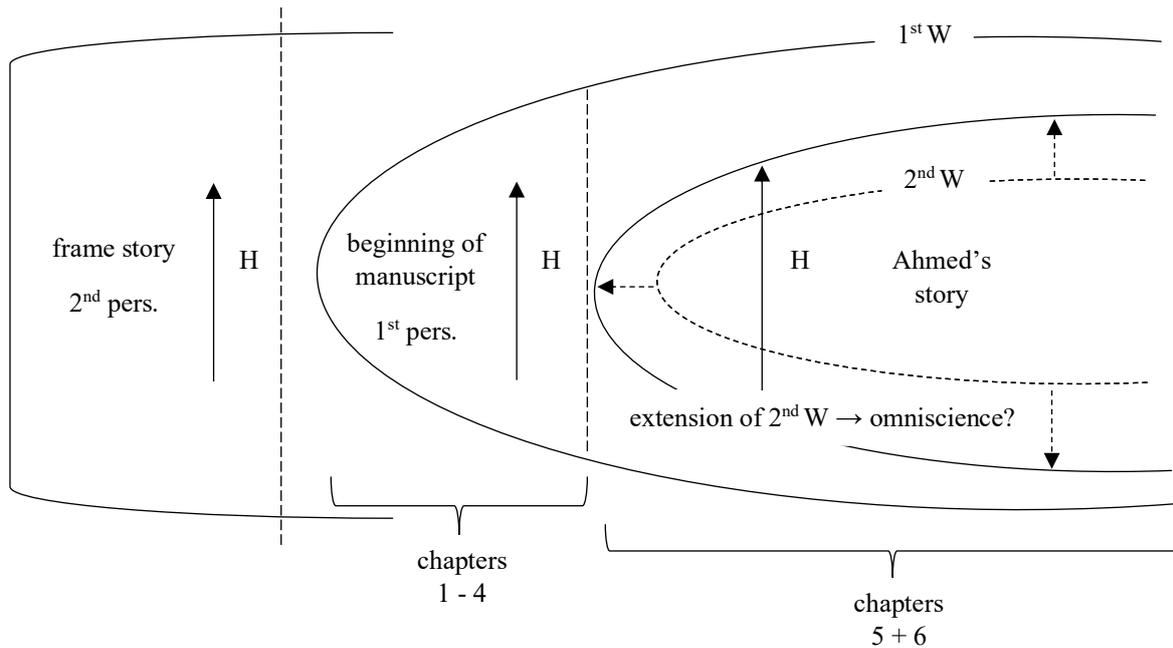
Of course, I can imagine Ahmed conducting tourists through the vast, desolate remains of Nalanda, that ancient Buddhist university destroyed for perhaps being a fort by invading Muslim hordes, looted so many centuries ago. And though I wondered what Ahmed must have felt recounting that history, as a Muslim, to Hindu or Buddhist tourists – his unspoken unease, their unspoken accusation – I could imagine such scenes and even narrate them to you. But I cannot really talk of how mother and son lived, or even what Ahmed did in his spare time. I know – the report notes it – that he had become a voracious reader. I know of this also from my experience of Ahmed. But what did mother and son talk of when they were in their rented two-bedroom section of a house in Maruganj – Ammajaan had refused to move – or when, say, Shab-e-baraat was being celebrated and Ammajaan was making the famous maida ka halwa that Ahmed had often mentioned and that, finally, was the reason for the report and my questions? (*Night of Happiness* 85-86)

In this passage, Mehrota openly admits that it is difficult for him to imagine certain aspects of Ahmed’s life but also makes it clear that he could potentially imagine and narrate other incidents that are not explained in detail in the report either and hence extend Ahmed’s whole in a subjective fashion. Mehrota thus conveys the impression to the reader that he is aware of the events he cannot retell as he does not know enough about them. However, it may make readers wonder how he could know other details he has mentioned before. Nevertheless, they may know what the situation is like when you would like to have more information on a topic and your imagination starts filling in the details automatically. Shortly afterwards, it becomes clear that Mehrota indeed starts to present incidents the report does not provide a lot of information on in detail as he is carried away by his imagination. For instance, when he addresses the circumstances of Ahmed’s marriage, he mentions that “Ahmed had himself found the girl he wanted to marry. How had it happened to a boy as shy as Ahmed? Ammajaan probably never got the full answer, but Devi’s report sketched a meeting that I could easily flesh out” (*Night of Happiness* 87). The line between fact and imagination becomes increasingly blurry when Mehrota indeed reports in detail how Ahmed got to know his wife in the following paragraph and thus extends Ahmed’s actual whole in a subjective fashion:

Imagine Ahmed a few weeks before he made his announcement to Ammajaan. He is a thin young man of average height, dressed in trousers and a checked shirt, sometimes a blue blazer or a green-yellow pullover (knitted by Ammajaan). He speaks various languages fluently. Imagine him walking down the roads of Bodh Gaya. It is early December, so he has his pullover on, and a cheap scarf. No, the pullover and scarf are my inventions, for the report simply mentioned that ‘the following account, as reported,

is ascertained to have taken place in early December.’ I can imagine December in Bodh Gaya; I had taken my wife – or perhaps vice versa – to Bodh Gaya in the winter. (*Night of Happiness* 87-88)

The switch to present tense indicates the beginning of Mehrota’s imagination, the third type of the forms outlined above, which clashes with the first type. However, Mehrota is able to skillfully smooth out the effects of this clash as he openly admits that he is imagining certain details. Additionally, the fact that he repeatedly asks readers to imagine the situation he is talking about easily draws them into the textual world and makes them feel the way Mehrota does. They are curious about the relationship between Ahmed and Roshni too and understand why Mehrota feels the need to flesh out the story. They may also understand what it is like when you suddenly remember other situations from the past when telling a story, which Mehrota does in the following. He draws upon a memory from his own life, the time he went to Bodh Gaya with his parents and later with his wife, to describe the place and to tell the reader that “[t]hat is mostly how [...] [he] imagine[s] the place with Ahmed walking up its main street, every bit a small-town Indian from the plains, dressed in western clothes and a knitted pullover, his scarf wrapped around his head and neck, chafing his hands to keep them warm in a winter that is almost summer for the Tibetans” (*Night of Happiness* 89). He continues to see Ahmed in this environment and to describe the scenery in present tense: “Ahmed is heading for their colony. He passes the many temples – all built in distinctive national styles – that line the road. Bodh Gaya is full of such temples. He catches just a faint glimpse of the Japanese temple, spare and neat, for it is a bit off the road. But he passes by the elaborately gilded Thai temple, turns left with the road, which shows a slight incline, and crosses the Tibetan temple to his left” (*Night of Happiness* 89). At some point, the lines between the four types of forms outlined above and hence also between Ahmed’s actual whole and Mehrota’s extension of it are completely blurry and it even seems to become unimportant that some of the things Mehrota narrates might not be the truth as the reader wants to know about the details of Ahmed’s story just as much as Mehrota himself does.



After a passage about Ahmed's future wife, which is narrated in a seemingly omniscient manner, Mehrota once more openly admits that he has to fill in the gaps himself:

Ahmed started going to Jogi's dhaba regularly. He had to eat somewhere on his days in Bodh Gaya. But he must have realized that pragmatism was not his only reason, for he never went there with any of the men. I can imagine the relationship as it developed, though Devi's man had put it in only a few sparse words: 'In due course, Ahmed started helping Roshni with her homework, and with medicines and doctors for her mother.' It says everything one needs to know, but what one needs to know seems insufficient in such cases, doesn't it? Even a pragmatic businessman like me can do better: imagine ... the clanking fan under which Ahmed sat as the year got warmer, Roshni just serving him first, maybe with a flirtatious joke that would leave him flustered and tongue-tied, then joining him at the table, despite Jogi shouting at her to get on with it, and slowly a conversation flowing between them [...]. (*Night of Happiness* 102)

This passage indicates a clash of various types of forms; the beginning resembles the narration of an omniscient narrator, which is then interrupted by a direct quote from Devi's report and afterwards continued by Mehrota's imagination as the facts from the report are insufficient to him. The reader is able to understand Mehrota's argument and may also feel that the interesting details about how exactly the relationship between Ahmed and Roshni developed are missing. The fact that these details are omitted in the report arouses both Mehrota's and the reader's curiosity and makes them wish they knew more, which is why Mehrota starts filling in the gaps himself. It seems to become unimportant that the details Mehrota adds are not the truth and may be considerably different from what has actually happened. Even the fact that these passages are repeatedly interrupted by Mehrota's comments, which openly state that he has to fill in the

gaps as the information provided in the report is insufficient to him, does not seem to be a problem anymore. However, this increasing blurring of facts and his imagination starts scaring Mehrota himself:

I can see Ahmed, naturally inclined to help others, offering to fetch a doctor when her [Roshni's] mother had one of her collapses ... I can imagine all this spread over the next year or two, though, as I have already confessed to you, this ability to imagine large segments of Ahmed's life leaves me shaken too. I ask myself: did you always have this hidden ability to speak about things that you have not witnessed, not *seen*, or has it been bestowed, a gift or a curse, on you by the very events driving you, here and now, to confess to a stranger? (*Night of Happiness* 103, emphasis in the original)

Mehrota makes it clear that his retelling of the report on Ahmed that the recipient has just read may be far from the truth and that his eagerness to know more may have fuelled his imagination. Readers are able to identify with Mehrota's situation as the comments he makes throughout these passages help them understand why he feels the need, and is able, to flesh out parts of Ahmed's story. Additionally, Mehrota's following observation draws attention to the fact that even the passages that he quotes directly from Devi's report and that therefore seem to add objective pieces of information to Ahmed's whole cannot necessarily be considered true facts as they are also based on the subjective perspectives of specific witnesses:

But in those days in Bodh Gaya, according to Devi's report, he still felt compelled to explain and defend.

Thubten, Devi's man had noted, still laughed at the recollection. (Thubten is now a prosperous middle-aged businessman, with a restaurant in Dharamsala, the report specified.) 'It was hilarious how old Ahmed would get into the intricacies of such matters,' Thubten had recounted in English over a beer to Devi's man. 'The guy was a walking encyclopaedia on his fucking faith. Oh sorry. You are not Muslim, are you? No? Thank God! I just tend to swear; I have nothing against any faith. I have a good relationship with all faiths: I leave them alone and they leave me alone. But Ahmed, my God, the man did go on and on. I think he gave me a long, rambling lecture on that occasion, quoting the *Quran* and – what's it called – the Haddis or Huddis or something, it's like a reference book on their prophet's activities, and I had just been pulling his leg. [...] That set him off again, and you know, the funniest thing about this episode is that I was accompanying him because of a matter to do with a woman. That is why he had come to me. He needed support. A woman was way beyond his ken.' (*Night of Happiness* 94-96)

This direct quote from the report contrasts sharply with the previous passages dominated by Mehrota's imagination and personal memories. But even though it is a direct quote, it draws specific attention to the fact that the seemingly objective details of the report, which form the basis for Ahmed's whole, are also based on subjective perspectives, indicating that it is almost impossible to keep the separate types of forms apart. The reader may not pay a lot of attention to the breaks between the different forms anymore, even though they are mostly indicated by

the beginning of a new paragraph. The effect is that finally all of the different types of narration, or forms, are likely to be perceived in the same way. They are all told as if they present facts that can be taken for granted, although it is clear that even the passages that are quoted directly from the report entail a subjective dimension as they state what, for instance, Ahmed's friend Thubten has told Devi's employee. They appear to present true facts at first sight, but, in reality, they are only subjective perspectives as well and may not necessarily be more reliable than Mehrota's retellings of the scenes he is reading about.

### Completing the Two Wholes

In the last two chapters, it becomes clear that Mehrota is not able to show any empathy for Ahmed when he finds out about the real reasons for his strange behaviour, indicating that he, now suddenly unable to imagine how Ahmed must feel, intends to stick to the plain facts without wanting to dig deeper. At the beginning of the sixth chapter, Mehrota first notes that "Ahmed's realities, it appeared, shifted with every new enquiry into it, as if he was not a solid human being but something amorphous, imaginary, ghostly" (*Night of Happiness* 115), indicating that he still does not know what to make of him. On his way to the office, Devi calls Mehrota to let him know that the second report on Ahmed does not contain all the available information as it is about sensitive matters and that he would therefore prefer to give him a verbal summary of it in his office (cf. *Night of Happiness* 116). Mehrota then retells the story Devi has told him in the manuscript, once more in the manner of an omniscient narrator, and also inserts direct quotes from Devi into some of the passages: "Devi covered Roshni and Ahmed's years in Mumbai in a few prosaic lines, reserving the bulk of his words to describe how they ended. 'They were happy, I suppose,' he told me. 'They rented a flat in the suburbs, and Ahmed commuted about two hours every day to work [...]'"  
 (Devi's report kept the information to bare facts, always carefully attributed to public sources" (*Night of Happiness* 119). When Devi tells Mehrota that there is no evidence of any fundamentalist background, Mehrota is seemingly relieved: "I was relieved. Despite the suspicions I had harboured soon after the evening in Ahmed's flat – suspicions that, I confess, did return to me occasionally – there was little to associate Ahmed with fundamentalist Islam" (*Night of Happiness* 122). Shortly afterwards, Devi hands passages of the secret report over to Mehrota, so that he can read them himself. After reading passages about the Godhra train burning, Mehrota points out that "Devi's report kept the information to bare facts, always carefully attributed to public sources" (*Night of Happiness* 126), and reveals the following quote, saying that,

‘[b]ased entirely on what the newspapers reported (see Appendix 3A) and not any evidence obtained or sought by this investigator, the riots that followed lead to the death of 790 Muslims – some put the estimate at double that number – and 254 Hindus. Thousands were injured and rendered homeless. It was reported in national newspapers (see Appendix 3B) that women were raped and impaled on spears; children were burned alive [...].’ (*Night of Happiness* 127)

Later, Mehrota inserts more quotes from the report into his narrative, before explaining in more detail what exactly happened to Roshni and therefore gradually completing Ahmed’s whole. He notes that these things were also stated in the report, but, instead of inserting direct quotes this time as well, he once more offers a retelling of the incident:

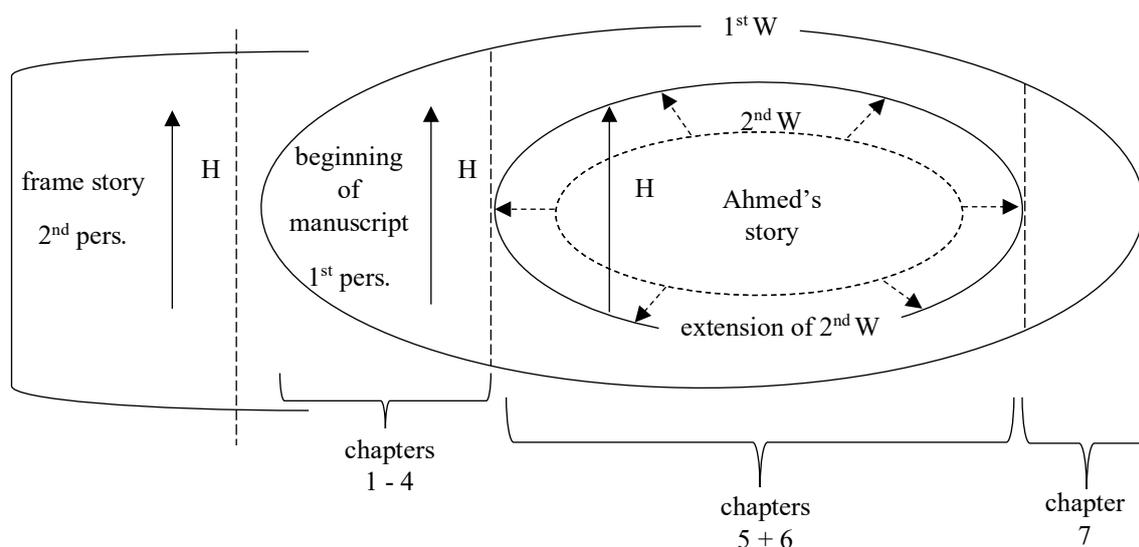
The mob went about its task methodically. In that sense, it was surely not a mob. When it banged on Roshni’s door, she did not open it. They broke it down. Then they dragged Roshni out of the flat. Only one neighbor tried to protect her. (I would like to believe this was so because all the men, like Ahmed, were away, stuck in the places where they worked.) It was an old South Indian man, who tried to tell the crowd that Roshni and her husband were part of their community, that they were not ‘bad’ Muslims, that they even participated in neighbourhood pujas. (*Night of Happiness* 128)

What exactly happens to Roshni is narrated in a new paragraph: “It was this organized mob that dragged Roshni down the stairs. They ripped the veil off her. They mocked her. ‘Where is your God?’ they shouted. ‘Where is your bastard man?’ they mocked. ‘No one can save you now, you Pakistani whore!’” (*Night of Happiness* 129). Mehrota is horrified when he notes the following: “Suddenly a space opened up around her. She was there in that space, with the leader next to her. Then the leader took a step back. And then another. He struck a match and threw it on Roshni. Some in the mob erupted into shouts of glory to the divine nation. Some started walking away in silence” (*Night of Happiness* 131). Mehrota expresses his shock after having retold this passage of the report: “I cannot imagine it any more. Or I can only imagine it as its opposite: a stone thrown into a lake, how the stone sinks, and the ripples spread, and then there is nothing. Then – in *my* world – there is nothing” (*Night of Happiness* 131, emphasis in the original). When Mehrota has overcome his shock after completing Ahmed’s whole, he thinks about what to do next, finally deciding that he will dismiss Ahmed (cf. *Night of Happiness* 133). As Mohite notes, Khair’s narrative thus draws attention to “the frustrations of having oneself labelled, having one’s story told and controlled by an uncomprehending other” (n.p.). Mehrota tries to explain the situation to himself as follows: “Facts have to be faced. I have strongly believed this. And whatever the fiction behind Ahmed’s existence, the fact was this: he was living a fiction, and that fiction was gradually living him. He was not reliable” (*Night of Happiness* 134). Hence, it becomes clear that even though Mehrota is shocked when he learns about the real reasons for Ahmed’s strange behaviour, he is not able to show empathy or to put

himself into his employee's situation. In addition, "[t]he reader is left to wonder if Ahmed's firing had anything really to do with the incident of the invisible halwa. Perhaps the only danger he posed to Mehrotra was the discomfort he caused by being a victim of Hindu violence" (n.p.), as Mehta points out. The novel indeed suggests that he is eventually unable to cope with the realisation that the person he had initially suspected to be a Muslim fundamentalist is, in fact, a victim of Hindu violence.

The impact of this circumstance is revealed in the seventh chapter, which adds the last few pieces to the large whole of Mehrotra's manuscript. Mehrotra retells how he received a box of halwa from Ahmed one year later and afterwards decided to drive to his flat to thank him and to give him a box of chocolates in return (cf. *Night of Happiness* 142-44). Like the rest of the novel, this chapter is divided into several episodes, which places emphasis on the scene changes and Mehrotra's most important thought processes. After being informed about Ahmed's suicide, he decides to check into a hotel and starts writing his manuscript as an attempt to deal with his guilty conscience. He addresses his readers again, stating that they should read the story or leave it in the drawer for the next guest or a member of staff to look at (cf. *Night of Happiness* 153-54), hoping to find people who share his mindset and will understand his decisions. In contrast to *Fireproof*, *Night of Happiness* does not focus explicitly on the Gujarat riots, the presentation of violence or an exploration of the psychological impact on the victims who have survived the tragedy but may have lost close friends and family members. Instead, the novel places emphasis on the problematic relationship between Muslims and Hindus in general, demonstrating what devastating effects groundless prejudices and a lack of open dialogue and empathy may have. The episodic plot and the interaction of the various types of forms that can be identified when Mehrotra retells Ahmed's story and extends it in a subjective fashion aim to make the reader feel the way the prejudiced protagonist does. In contrast to *Fireproof* or *The Blue Bedspread* with their various obvious clashes of forms, the transitions in *Night of Happiness* are less conspicuous and rather influence readers subconsciously, gradually making them identify with Mehrotra's situation. Additionally, the vivid and detailed descriptions of the separate episodes easily draw readers into the illusion of the fictional world, and Mehrotra's comments help them understand why and in what way his mind starts filling in the missing details of the report and thus extends Ahmed's whole in a subjective fashion. It therefore gradually becomes clear that the boundaries of Ahmed's actual whole and hence the boundaries between truth and imagination are blurry, but, ironically, Mehrotra is unwilling and unable to imagine how Ahmed must feel after his wife's death, and is, in this respect, convinced that it is necessary to stick to the plain facts. Ahmed, on the other hand, is given no voice at all

and only presented through the eyes of his employer, whose unwillingness to communicate openly with him demonstrates that he is not as liberal and open-minded as he initially claims. The blurring of the lines between fact and imagination, achieved by the clashes of the different types of forms that make up the two wholes, therefore lays bare how the human mind may work and exposes Mehrota's true mindset, eventually implying that he is unable to stand the presence of a Muslim victim of Hindu violence in his office.



### 5.3 Suppressing Memories: Raj Kamal Jha's *Fireproof*

#### An Overview of Content and Form

*Fireproof* tells the story of the mysterious journey of Mr Jay, the novel's protagonist and homodiegetic narrator, which takes place after his wife has given birth to their first child in a hospital in Ahmedabad during the Gujarat riots. Even though the baby is severely deformed, Jay feels deep affection for his son and sets out on a dangerous trip through the city to get to the train station and meet up with a mysterious woman, Miss Glass, who has promised him to set his son right. The story gradually drifts off into the realm of magical realism, depicting an underwater hideout built for the victims of the riots. In this unknown environment, Jay is suddenly forced to stand trial and confronted with the memories of the crimes he committed during the riots, which his mind had so far managed to suppress. It turns out that the deformed baby he was carrying around all day is, in fact, not his son but the fetus he cut out of the womb of a Muslim woman during the attacks. After the trial and his admission of guilt, he is finally

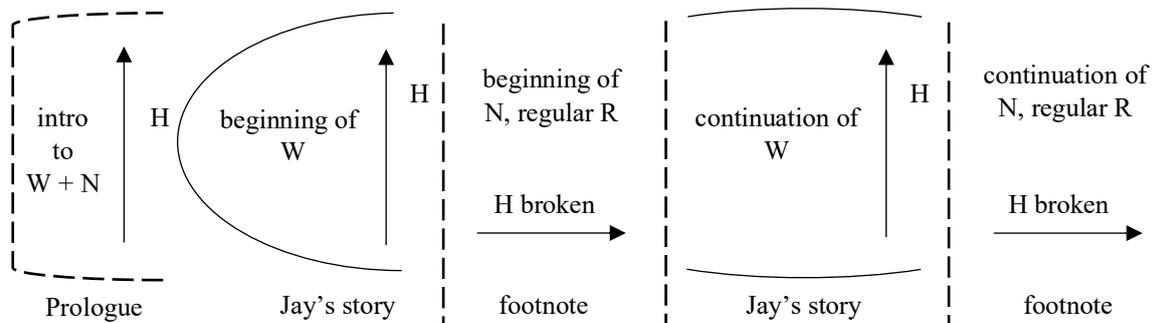
allowed to return to the world of the living and the hospital in Ahmedabad, where his wife has given birth to a healthy child.

Jha's novel provides an insight into the mind of a traumatised murderer who is haunted by the memories of his horrible actions but tries to suppress them and to convey the impression to the reader that he is an innocent person and caring father who is eager to find a cure for his child's condition. An analysis of how the various forms that can be identified on the structural level interact with each other will demonstrate how the reader is made to identify with Jay's situation and experiences his painful act of remembering in a similar fashion. The story Jay is telling must be understood as a whole whose pieces are gradually assembled in the course of the narrative in a fairly linear manner. However, this process is repeatedly interrupted by the employment of other forms, such as the footnotes of dead characters, which gradually build up a horizontal network of oppositional voices; this network, which interrupts Jay's whole and has the potential to extend beyond it, hence undermines the narrative hierarchy Jay has established. The fact that the elements of the network keep interrupting Jay's whole additionally indicates that his memory is slowly coming back, gradually exposing him as a criminal and unreliable narrator who has taken advantage of the narrative hierarchy he has established in order to persuade the reader that he is an innocent person and caring father.

### **The Footnotes: Undermining Jay's Credibility**

The footnotes, which have already been analysed in the theoretical part of this study, are one of the most important devices to undermine Jay's apparent credibility. They repeatedly interrupt Jay's whole and the main narrative he is telling, opening up a clear opposition between him and the dead characters, which may arouse suspicion in the reader early on. In fact, the dead already speak in the opening statement, the prologue, making it clear that they were ruthlessly killed during the riots and establishing a narrative hierarchy in favour of the victims for a short period of time. Even though they additionally state that, in the following, their story will be told by a narrator who is still "one of the living" (*Fireproof* 6), they also announce that they will "reappear to speak in footnotes" (*Fireproof* 7), thus indicating that they may not fully accept the narrator's version of the story and see the necessity to add certain details. Readers may already become suspicious of Jay when he tells them at the beginning of the narrative that they should not listen to the voices of the dead that keep haunting him: "Don't listen to the dead, please do not listen to the dead – whatever they tell you, whatever fancy name or un-name they wish to go by, howsoever lyrical they may wax, because once you lend them your ears, they

will nibble at your guilt, feed on your pity, swallow you whole, from head to toe, make no mistake” (*Fireproof* 11). However, the reader is continually forced to listen to the dead, who reveal their horrible fates in footnotes throughout the whole novel. As Nora Anna Escherle notes in this context, “[i]n the dominant public discourse in India, the voices of the victims, the stories of the individuals who have suffered from atrocities, are seldom, if ever, heard; more often than not, they are ignored, even suppressed, due to their alleged potential to shake and undermine the fragile secularist peace” (206). However, they are given a voice in Jha’s novel, and each time their footnotes interrupt Jay’s story, it becomes more obvious that he is not in control of the narrative, even though this is what he pretends to be. Annie Cottier supports this idea, arguing that, “[i]n the footnotes of *Fireproof*, the desire of the dead to avenge their own death as well as the suffering of those who survived comes to the fore. In fact, as it turns out, it is the dead who are in charge of the narrative, not Mr Jay. At best, he tells the story for them” (309). At the beginning, the footnotes may have a disturbing or confusing effect, but after some time the reader gets used to the recurring pattern and the specific rhythm they create. The footnotes must therefore be understood as elements of a network that interrupts Jay’s whole and whose primary purpose is to demonstrate that the story Jay is telling does not present the truth, gradually exposing him as an unreliable narrator and ruthless criminal despite the new narrative hierarchy he has established at the beginning of his whole.



The fact that most of the footnotes are structured the same way supports the impression that all of the dead work towards the same goal and have come up with a specific strategy to convince the reader that their perspectives are more reliable than Jay’s. Cottier makes a similar observation, arguing that

[a]ll footnotes are rendered as dramatic monologues and follow a similar pattern: the dead first state who they are and what their situation in life was, then narrate what happened on the day they died, and finally describe their death, which mostly occurred by fire. Taken together, the footnotes form a choir of lament which builds up an exceptionally strong textual presence by way of repetition. With each new testimony,

the personal narratives of individual voices build up a collective narrative which expresses a collective identity. (310)

For instance, one of the dead disclosing his experiences in the footnotes is a fruitseller:

I am Fruitseller, I was twenty-seven years old, I was born in Gaya in Bihar, I had a wife and four children, I lived in the slum under the bridge, my father was also a fruitseller [...] I could do little when the mob set our house on fire, I opened a window to let the air come in but instead there was more smoke and more fire, I thought the fire couldn't be so strong it would take all seven of us but it did, I was the last one to go, I am not going to describe to you how my wife and children died, I cannot describe that, all I can say is that I was the last one to go [...]. (*Fireproof* 151)

The fact that the dead do not mention their names but only their professions additionally indicates that they are not the only victims but symbolically represent a whole group of people that died during the riots. Further, the subforms – the unconventional punctuation and the different font – attract the reader's attention and put special emphasis on the victims' individual fates. Each of the footnotes functions as an individual whole that interrupts Jay's story at some point and is part of a powerful and loosely connected network that gradually builds up a strong opposition to Jay's narrative. Nevertheless, Sarah Ilott argues in her essay on the topic of abjection in Jha's novel that, "[g]raphically subordinate to the main body of the text, the dead whisper in the prologue and the footnotes, a strategy that simultaneously grants them a belated subjectivity whilst also repressing and sublimating it, rendering it subsidiary to the main thrust of the narrative" (671). She adds that "the footnotes are in a far smaller font and often grammatically incorrect, making the asides appear less valid and those that write them peripheral to the story. The voices are already overwritten by silence as the characters are already dead" (Ilott 671). While it is true that the footnotes appear to be subsidiary to Jay's narrative, presenting the stories of people who no longer have a voice in the world of the living, it would be wrong to underestimate their impact. The fact that the footnotes must be understood as elements of a network that keeps interrupting Jay's story indicates that the voices of the dead, which visualise Jay's pricks of conscience, are more powerful than him, actively shaping the creation of Jay's whole and thus his main narrative leading up to the final trial. Hence, the dead may be considered subordinate in the world of the living but have acquired the power to torture Jay mentally and to make him confess to his crimes, because, after all, "[i]t is only upon admitting his guilt that he is forgiven by the dead and is able to rejoin his family. However, the baby Ithim, whom he loved, will always be in his mind when he looks at his own child, thus reminding him of his gruesome deeds" (Cottier 312). The footnotes therefore form an important counterweight to Jay's narrative, gradually exposing his true nature and undermining his

alleged reliability by giving a voice to the voiceless and extending the oppositional network that keeps interrupting Jay's whole.

### A Variety of Small-Scale Forms: Jay's Attempts to Maintain the Narrative Hierarchy

What supports this impression of opposition is the fact that the stories of the dead come across as unemotional and only state plain facts. This enhances the contrast they form to Jay's narrative, which tells the story of a caring father who only wants the best for his ill child. Thus, the reader may initially identify with Jay, having almost no reason to be suspicious of him. However, the more footnotes appear and the more this network of oppositional voices expands, the more the reader realises that Jay may not be reliable as a narrator since the individual elements of the network have the power to interrupt his whole, and their objective portrayal of facts further conveys the impression that the information they provide is more trustworthy than Jay's. Jay, on the other hand, tries his best to suppress his pricks of conscience and to prove to the recipient and to himself that he is sane and in control of his story, an impression that is supported by the interaction of various small-scale forms that Jay employs during the creation of his whole. For instance, when Jay takes the baby home and tries to describe the appearance of his son, he comes up with a test for the reader:

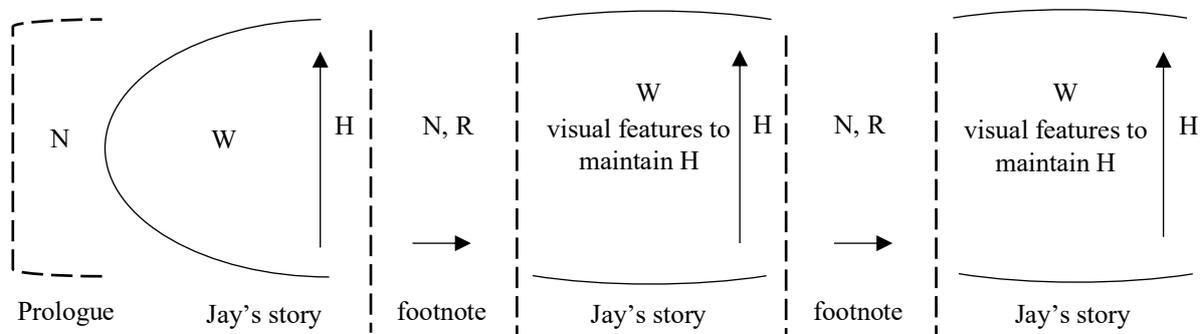
Imagine you are taking an examination, sitting in a class, with a piece of paper in front on the desk, and Ithim facing the entire class on a raised platform with the blackboard as his backdrop so all of you can see him clearly. The question in the test is: *Please look at the child carefully (he will be placed on the desk for the entire duration of this examination). Please rank the following in order of likeness. Mark your rank in the box provided against each choice. (Fireproof 73, emphasis in the original)*

What follows on the next page is, indeed, a list of possible descriptions of Ithim and a box next to each of the options:

- A small cylinder made up of flesh and skin, wrapped around bones and cartilage.
- A vegetable, gourd or pumpkin, more long than wide, that has been placed on a fire and quickly removed, leaving its two ends charred and its tip wrinkled.
- An oversized insect, its six legs and its two antennae torn out, leaving just the abdomen intact.
- [...]
- A child's toy, made of rubber, a broken toy, perhaps a train or a cargo truck to be dragged along with a piece of string, bits and pieces of it fallen off, lost while the child was at play.
- A bit of all of the above.

(Fireproof 74)

The page is designed like a test on a sheet of paper, which is supposed to make it easier for the reader to identify with the situation as text passages that include such visual features are likely to score high in experientiality, in the sense Caracciolo uses the term. Probably almost any reader is able to remember such a situation from school when they were sitting in a silent classroom and had to do the tasks on the sheet of paper lying in front of them. If Jay just thought of such a scenario in his mind and described it to the reader, it would be less likely to trigger the same responses. As the test is visually presented on the page, Jay tries to create an impression of credibility and asks readers to actively reflect on the options presented in front of them. Additionally, the layout of the page places special emphasis on the individual descriptions of the baby that the examinees could choose from, forcing them to imagine every single option in detail. Hence, Jay employs this multimodal feature in his whole to prove to readers how desperate and confused he is, trying to make them identify with his situation, in the sense that they are asked to imagine a scene that forces them to reflect on the thought processes of a caring father, who is, unsurprisingly, concerned about his severely deformed child. Hence, this small-scale form, the test, productively interacts with the passages of linear storytelling Jay produces as it visualises his dilemma and helps him suppress his traumatic memories.



Before the main plotline is interrupted by the test, Jay is looking for words to describe his son, but without success:

So what did I see? There is no one answer, there cannot be one answer. I have already described him, at the beginning, cold and clinical, and yet that doesn't even begin to do justice to the original. For the Really New, the genuine original, defies all description because there is nothing in the old to compare it to. But then, because the number of words at our command is always limited, predetermined, we have no choice but to fall back on the old, on what has already been imagined, what has already been described. That's why I am going to take the easy way out. As if we are all in school. (*Fireproof* 73)

Jay struggles to describe the appearance of his son and is unable to categorise him, a natural human desire. He comes up with the test as he cannot think of any other way to convey the extent of his dilemma adequately to the reader; the descriptions offered in the test help the reader understand Jay's desperate situation, making it clear how indefinable Ithim really must be. One may wonder why he does not simply provide a photo or a drawing of Ithim, but that might not adequately reflect the chaos in his mind and the thought processes that keep torturing him. The test, on the other hand, forces readers to imagine his situation and may even convey the impression that they are under pressure to make a decision as something that cannot be described by words and is outside of discourse ultimately has no meaning at all. After the test, Jay talks about his desperation more explicitly. He first makes the assumption that most readers have probably ticked the last box (cf. *Fireproof* 75), before providing a deeper insight into his feelings: "What should I have done? I, who had no luxury of taking tests or marking the order of likeness? I, the father, who had just brought his son home and now was looking at him, what about me? What should I have done? Should I have recoiled in horror? In fear or anger? Disgust, maybe even hate? In fact, when I first looked at Ithim, I felt nothing" (*Fireproof* 75). This insight into the feelings of a deeply concerned father appears to be fairly convincing, even though the surreal dimension of the narrative may make it difficult for readers to fully identify with Jay's situation. However, Jay uses the test in an attempt to visualise his dilemma as a caring and worried father, showing how confused somebody who would potentially describe his son as a mixture of a vegetable, an insect and a toy must be, even though this might even sound funny.

Senft already has a less favourable impression of Jay at this point, noting that "[t]he image of Jay is ambiguous and even partly schizophrenic. It is built up mainly through his thoughts and feelings, but these do not provide a stable portrait of Jay and of the situation" (149). Senft explains his view in more detail, arguing that, "[o]n the one hand, Jay is depicted as a likable person with very human reactions to the problematic situations with which he is confronted. On the other hand, he acts strangely as an unreliable narrator, his language and dreams are full of callousness and violence and he sometimes displays autistic features" (149). However, Jay once more tries to convey the impression that he is sane and reliable when he finally sets out on the journey through the city with Ithim. Even though he sees corpses falling from the sky, he tries to keep up the impression of credibility when he addresses this circumstance explicitly:

If seeing is believing, then maybe not seeing is not believing. How I wish, therefore, I had an image, like the photograph of the pavement I took from Miss Glass's hospital room. Better still, a series of images, maybe video plus audio, but I don't and even if I

had, I doubt it would make much of a difference because you would watch, you would hear and, in the end, you would dismiss it as doctored, you would say they can do these things these days, they can split, they can splice, morph and manipulate, they can pull anything out of thin air so why not bodies from the sky? So how do I say this without straining credibility? Well, I will do two things. One, I will tell it like it is, and two, I will describe everything else in a fashion, absolutely matter of fact, just like I did with Ithim in the beginning, switching off the adjectival lights, using terms cold and clinical, black and white. (*Fireproof* 135)

Jay explicitly addresses his status as a narrator, expressing his concerns that the addressee may not believe him when he reports the incident of corpses falling from the sky. He therefore declares that he intends to stick to the plain facts to be perceived as a reliable narrator and to maintain the narrative hierarchy he has established. A sketch of the route he is taking with Ithim is inserted into the novel shortly afterwards, and Jay is keen to explain to the recipient why he made it and what it shows:

But this was Ithim's first day out and the only way I can do justice to that occasion is to mark the route we took. In fact, I have a diagram to show you, a simple line diagram in black and white with no room for grey. Our L-shaped route, starting from the steps that lead from my apartment building to the pavement. Ending with our destination, the bus stop on the other side. For me, the father, a short walk on the surface of this city, a walk I have taken a million times, but for my son that morning, almost a trip to the moon. I have put it down on paper for another reason, self-serving though it may sound. To impress upon you that my recollection isn't merely impressionistic, it's based on facts. So that later, when I tell you about the bodies falling, you don't brush it away as my momentary lapse of reason. (*Fireproof* 136-37)

Jay is keen to prove to the reader that he is genuinely concerned about his son and that the map is based on facts. He repeatedly addresses the reader and tries to convince them that he is a responsible father, building up a more intimate relationship that is based on trust. However, Senft notes with reference to the same text passage that "the content of the map and the explanation Jay provides for its creation undermine this purpose. His other statements and the situation are too strange to create the reliability Jay is aiming for and meaning is destabilised within the fictional reality" (148). Directly after his justifications, the sketch of the route is inserted into the novel. It is L-shaped and names the places he and Ithim will have to pass to get to the bus stop. The map emphasises his justifications, meaning that he intends to prove to the recipient that he is in control of the situation and has worked out a plan that will not endanger the safety of his beloved son. The sketch of the route Jay is taking has effects similar to the test. Like the test, the sketch first seems to interrupt Jay's story but actually harmonises with it as he uses it to convey the impression that he is still sane and in control of the narrative. Further, the sketch may easily remind readers of a situation they have been in themselves. Most readers may

have drawn a similar sketch at some point in their lives, for instance when visiting a new place. The sketch in the novel therefore scores high in experientiality, serves as a truth claim and conveys the impression to the reader that Jay is able to organise the dangerous trip. Afterwards, Jay describes the different places they pass in separate sections, proving to the reader that he responsibly follows the intended route and does not deviate from his initial plans:

### **Fruitseller**

He is among the first to come in every morning and set up his mobile shop on the pavement. That day, he had rigged up two wooden planks propped on upturned wicker baskets for his display cart. I see him every day when I go to work, he sells bananas, mostly. He supplements, complements, depending on the season. [...]

### **Street Divider**

Past Fruitseller and his bananas, past the flies, past Manhole Man, the growing hillock of sewage, Ithim and I began to cross the street. Midway we stopped at the divider. The divider is, in essence, a long cement garden, a narrow rectangular strip that bisects the street, about four feet wide and a few inches above street level, running as far as your eyes can see on either side. (*Fireproof* 137-41)

The sketch and the descriptions harmonise with the passages of linear storytelling Jay employs to create his whole and even reinforce the image of Jay as a responsible father when they meet since they prove that Jay sticks to the route he has thought of and is familiar with the environment. However, the surreal elements of the narrative make it increasingly difficult for readers to fully believe Jay and to identify with his situation.

### **Miss Glass's Email: Expanding the Network of Oppositional Voices**

When Jay reaches the cybercafé where he intends to check whether he has received an email from Miss Glass, it becomes clear that his ability to guide readers and to provide them with a stable narrative framework during the process of creating his whole is fading. However, when he starts reading the email, he still appears to be the innocent father who is deeply concerned about his ill son. The email she has sent him is inserted into the novel and must be understood as another element of the network of oppositional voices that interrupts the whole Jay is creating; the first part of it is written in the form of a poem:

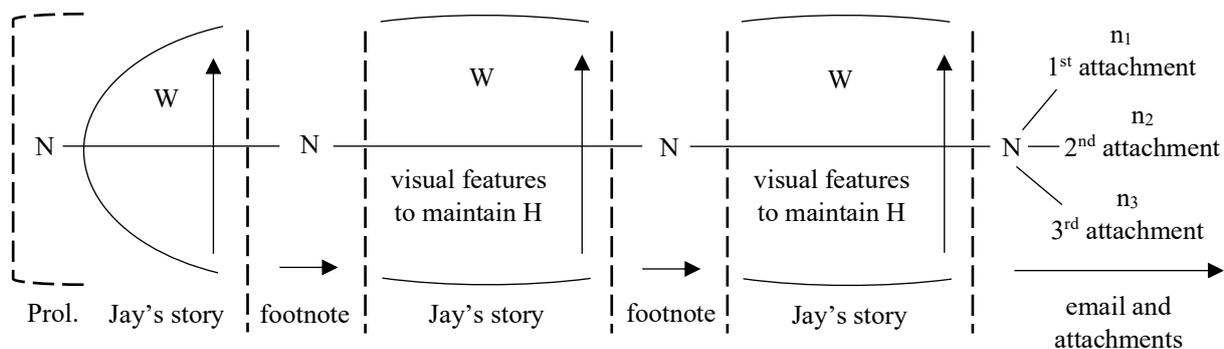
At the railway station,  
As we discussed last night,  
Meet at five in the evening,  
We will set the baby right.  
  
Don't worry about a thing,  
I will remain by your side,

Yours loving Miss Glass,  
She who knows where to hide.

And in case you don't see me  
In the maddening crowd,  
There will be someone there  
To call out, clear and loud.

(*Fireproof* 161-62)

The reader is just as surprised as Jay himself by this message. Jay even gets angry upon reading the poem and starts thinking that Miss Glass might be a fraud (cf. *Fireproof* 162). Neither Jay nor the reader would have expected to read an email that is written in verse, an unusual form for this type of medium. Even the head of the email, which reveals information about the sender, the receiver and the subject of the conversation, is printed at the top of the page. Hence, readers do not expect a poem afterwards but a text in prose that is close to everyday language. The email therefore displays a structural break in itself, which gives Jay the impression that Miss Glass does not take his worries and plan to cure his son seriously. Readers may be just as relieved as Jay is when they notice a proper message from Miss Glass in the second half of the email. She first explains that she decided to start the message with a poem as she thought it would be good to “bring a light tone” (*Fireproof* 163, emphasis in the original), and then tells Jay about the fire in the city and the person he is supposed to meet at the train station (cf. *Fireproof* 163-67). However, the poem rather conveys the impression that Miss Glass tries to mock Jay instead of trying to cheer him up. The attachments of the email, which Jay downloads after reading the message, present the stories of three Muslim characters who got attacked during the riots and whose family members were ruthlessly killed, thus extending the network of footnotes. The long reports offered in the attachments once more interrupt Jay’s whole and force him to disappear for a long period of time as a heterodiegetic narrator is put in charge of the separate narratives of the network.



The attachments develop their own dynamics, describing incidents that are so horrible that Jay's worries about his son fall into oblivion for a long time. The first attachment is about Tariq, a young boy whose mother got murdered during the attacks. At the beginning of the attachment, there is a photo of Tariq's burnt house, visually illustrating the cruelties committed against the Muslim population. After a description of the house and Tariq's appearance, the story of how the attackers came to the house and tortured Tariq's mother is provided. What is striking is that Tariq is described as if he could be seen in the photo: "Our first eyewitness is a boy. Name is Tariq, he is ten, or, at the most, eleven years old. He wears shorts and a T-shirt although this is February and it is cold, and if you look close enough, you will see his elbows and his knees are bare. The skin covering them is cracked and dry" (*Fireproof* 171). This paragraph is placed at the beginning of the attachment and inserted directly under the photo. The heterodiegetic narrator directly addresses the readers and tells them to look at Tariq, even though he cannot be found in the photo. However, it is readers' natural reaction to take a closer look at the photo to make sure that they have not overlooked him. Gabriele Rippl, who explores the device of ekphrasis in Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* and in *The Enchantress of Florence* as well as in Jha's *Fireproof*, additionally notes that "[w]hile documentary photographs are commonly understood as a means of authentication, in Jha's novel the words de-authenticate the pictures by describing things not to be seen in them" (150). Readers might be confused as they are not able to see Tariq in the photo, and Jay's reaction is probably similar. It only becomes clear to the reader towards the end of the novel that the email attachments were supposed to remind Jay of the cruel actions his mind had managed to suppress for a long time. In fact, the attachments may even stand symbolically for Jay's mind and its attempts to suppress the cruel memories, meaning that his mind brings up certain memories but deliberately leaves out the details that point more explicitly to his guilt and the images of the people he has harmed. The fact that the descriptions de-authenticate the photos therefore visually underlines the processes that might be going on in the mind of a guilty and traumatised murderer. After being forced to take a closer look at the horrible scene to search for Tariq, who is not presented in the photo, the reader is offered the following description of the house:

That's his [Tariq's] house in the picture. A simple frame. Simpler than the house a child would draw when told to draw a house. Just a long rectangular box, the windows cut out as an afterthought. The house built, as if, not to defy the elements (the rain, the sun, the dank or the chill), but instead to surrender itself to them, its plaster to be streaked, its corners to be shadowed, its walls to be eroded. Unprepared, totally, for fire, for men intending to kill and burn. That's why the door's gone, the windows and the ceiling, all shattered into countless pieces scattered inside and out. There are some clouds in the sky but no evidence of smoke, it's bright, it's clear. We will come back to this house later. Now let's return to last night. (*Fireproof* 171-72)

The photo harmonises with the description as it visually illustrates the impact of the cruelties committed against the Muslim population. These two small-scale forms, the photo and the description, which are part of the same element of the network, therefore productively interact with each other, creating a greater sense of immediacy and initially misleading the reader, who is likely to start searching for Tariq in the photo and is thus forced to look at every single detail of the horrible scenery. Additionally, the fact that the house is described in detail afterwards may induce readers to look at the photo again, encouraging them to imagine what has happened there. The photo thus scores high on a scale of experientiality, reminding readers of similar incidents they may have seen on the news, or, in the worst case, witnessed in their own lives. After this introduction to Tariq and his former home, the reader is prepared for the portrayal of the cruel events that have happened in the boy's life. This part of the attachment is written in present tense, creating greater immediacy and forcing both Jay and the reader to imagine the situation in detail: "Through the drift of the fog and the smoke from fires far away, through the yellow haze of the neons in front, through the black-white exhaust of vehicles that streak past his house, through his tears that bend, refract everything he sees, Tariq witnesses the woman lying on the street. She is his mother. Tariq's eyes also witness four men. A, B, C and D" (*Fireproof* 172). Tariq witnesses the cruelties committed against his mother, and the narrator adds that, "behind all this, there must be some rhyme and there must be some reason. But forget reason for a second. Let's get the rhyme over with first. Even though it's silly, even though it's stupid. But that's the way it is. Rhyme, different schemes. This one is *abcb, defe*" (*Fireproof* 173, emphasis in the original). This word play is intensified by a poem that is inserted into the attachment and extends this element of the network:

*A wears glasses,  
B, a striped shirt.  
C ties his shoes  
And D means to hurt.*

*A pulls her hair,  
C gives a shout,  
B just watches  
As D lashes out.*

(*Fireproof* 173, emphasis in the original)

The poem and the report of what Tariq witnesses effectively interact with each other. Tariq does not understand what is happening and why the criminals attack his innocent mother. The poem reflects this idea as it follows a specific rhyme scheme but, on the content level, does not provide any reasons why this incident is happening and only describes what can be witnessed

from the outside. This further emphasises the fact that the novel “completely refrains from providing any reason for what happened and therefore insinuates the very pointlessness of the usual arduous search for reasons in the aftermath of communal violence” (208), as Escherle points out in her essay. The same applies to the footnotes: “[...] they [the dead] do not ask for the reasons or offer any explanation for what the perpetrators did to them or their kin. What they do is describe explicitly what happened, and accuse one perpetrator for [sic] committing these crimes. In other words, Jha’s novel gives plenty of information about the ‘how’ and also discloses the innuendo of the ‘who,’ but it does not give an easy answer to the question of ‘why’” (Escherle 207). Additionally, the poem attracts the reader’s attention and places special emphasis on what exactly each of the four attackers is doing. The reader is made to feel like a witness who might have to describe the appearance of the attackers to the police later on, or like a detective who is trying to find out who A, B, C and D are. The rhyme additionally makes it easier for the reader to memorise the details and implies that there might be a certain pattern to watch out for. The things Tariq remembers after the attack are presented in the form of a list, which has a similar effect:

- 1 The end of his mother’s sari tearing. Sound like paper being ripped, shredded, in the middle of the night.
  - 2 Laughter and talk, talk and laughter. From all four: A, B, C and D. Mixed up, jumbled, so that he can’t make out whose laugh is whose, whose voice is whose.
  - 3 Their teeth. White. They take care of their teeth.
  - 4 Their shoulders. Rising and falling with their laughs.
  - 5 Mother saying something, words in a language he has never heard before. Or maybe the words are not her own, are being pushed from somewhere inside her, without her even knowing.
- [...]

*(Fireproof 175)*

The list continues like this and, like the poem, places special emphasis on specific details that Tariq notices. Additionally, the points mentioned in the list are condensed and force readers to imagine the scene visually and to pay attention to every single detail, which has a more shocking effect and once more puts them in the shoes of the witness. These small-scale forms – the photo, the poem and the list – thus actively shape the appearance of the attachment and help to trigger more extreme reactions in the reader, who is likely to blank out Jay’s worries while reading the reports. Another poem describes how the attackers return to set the house on fire:

*Ma, don’t you worry,  
You won’t feel the pain.  
The fire will be gone,  
Then will come the rain.*

*Its drops will be cold,  
Its tears will be wet,  
But I'm not going to cry  
At least, not yet.*

(*Fireproof* 184-85, emphasis in the original)

The poem provides an insight into Tariq's thoughts and expresses his desperation. In contrast to the other type of poem that places emphasis on the appearance and actions of the four suspects, this one is supposed to appeal to the reader's emotions.

The other two attachments follow a similar pattern. They first provide photos of destroyed places, then introduce the characters, and finally describe the attacks. Hence, the three attachments taken together can be considered a small-scale network within the larger network that interrupts Jay's whole. The attachments are presumably also written by Miss Glass, who has composed some sort of bill of indictment against Jay. Some details, such as the names of the attackers, are left out deliberately, so that Jay is forced to think about the cruelties instead of denying his guilt right away; he is supposed to gradually remember his actions and to feel increasingly guilty. It therefore turns out that Jay is actually not in charge of his thoughts and the narrative but controlled by Miss Glass and the cruel memories he is trying to suppress. At this point, the reader might become more suspicious of Jay but does not know for sure that he is responsible for the crimes presented in the attachments. The reader tries to make sense of the attachments the seemingly innocent and caring father has just received and is put in the position of a detective who tries to figure out the connections between the different pieces of the novel. As Cottier observes in this context, "[t]he narrative and generic complexity of *Fireproof* challenges readers to put the pieces together by themselves, and it is only towards the very end of the novel that the issues it engages with fully become clear: trauma, memory, testimony, and guilt in the light of communal violence" (307). The attachments extend the network and have a similarly destabilising effect on Jay's whole and the narrative hierarchy as the footnotes since readers start realising that Jay is losing control of the narrative and is no longer able to provide answers to the questions they may have at this point. Instead, Jay and the reader seem to be in the same position and have the same level of knowledge as neither of the two is able to fully make sense of the attachments at this point.

### **Photos to Trigger Repressed Memories**

The impression that Jay does not seem to know more than the reader and tries to suppress his painful memories is emphasised when the photo of Tariq's house is inserted into the novel once

more shortly afterwards and therefore interrupts Jay's whole. When Jay arrives at the train station and is asked to look at the email again, he remembers having seen the photo of Tariq's burnt house before: "I was looking at something I had seen earlier, long before Miss Glass had sent me the message, in fact, even before Miss Glass had made the telephone call that night. It was the image I had found in her room in the Burns Ward" (*Fireproof* 307). The insertion of the photo has the same impact on the reader. The reader probably knows what the situation is like when you look at something and suddenly remember that you have seen the object before in a different place or context. The photo therefore has the potential to put readers into Jay's shoes and to easily make them identify with his situation. When Jay picks up the photo in Miss Glass's hospital room, only the bottom half of it is shown and readers may not notice right away that it is the photo of Tariq's home that is presented later on. The bottom part of the photo is described as follows when Jay finds it in the hospital room:

The photograph shows a pavement. A street in a city, perhaps this city itself because look at the rubble lining it, covering it completely, not even leaving a space for pedestrians to walk. There is a sapling that grows beside the pavement, you can see it in the bottom left-hand corner of the picture, and another a bit to the right, both stunted because their roots are trapped in cement, their leaves breathe in the fumes of petrol, diesel and kerosene of vehicles, their stems are drenched with the spit of strangers. In the foreground, that's where I would like to draw your attention, in the pile of garbage, are three things lying on the street. (*Fireproof* 62)

The description is designed to mislead the reader, as in the attachment. It is not possible to see the three objects that Jay refers to, and the saplings are only noticeable when one looks very closely at the photo. Rippl makes similar observations with reference to the same photo and text passage:

At this point it becomes obvious how Jha deals with photography: Not only does he provide a reproduction of the photo, he also delivers an ekphrasis of it which at first seems to describe the depicted scene truthfully down to the minutest detail. Only eventually does the reader notice that the protagonist's ekphrasis, which is explicitly addressed to her, trying to involve her, does not match her own reception of the picture; no matter how long she looks at the picture, she cannot see what the protagonist seems to see there. (147)

Rippl adds that "[o]nly at the end of the novel does the reader understand why the protagonist is able to see more than s/he, why he can zoom into the picture: The photo functions as the trigger of displaced memories, reminding Mr. Jay of his own participation in the torturing and killing of innocent Muslim citizens" (126). Readers are made to experience the situation the way Jay does. He starts remembering the scene of the cruelties he has committed when he looks

at the photo again, and readers also know that they have seen the photo before. Rippl summarises the important function of the photos as follows:

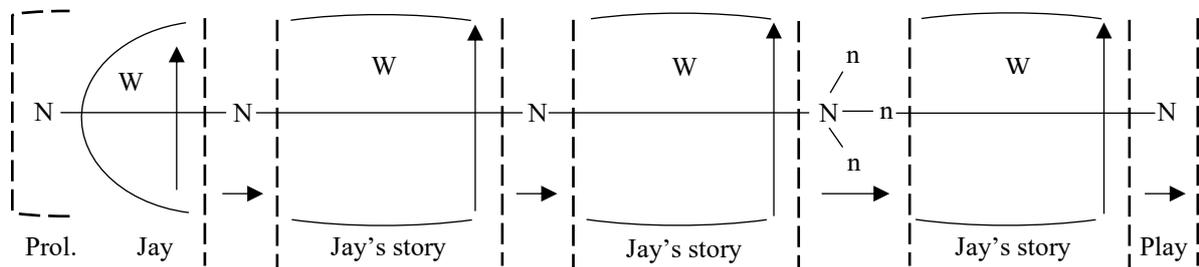
They trigger stories, document, give evidence to crimes, boost processes of remembering and verbalize traumatic experience. Ekphrasis as a means of captioning and describing the photographs of communal violence makes us focus our attention and ruminate on the photographed communal crime scenes at a time when deluges of digitally produced pictures swamp us, and forgetting and attention deficits are the rule. (151)

The photos and descriptions therefore effectively interact with each other, creating not only a greater sense of immediacy but also forcing readers to pay attention to the details and to fill in the gaps themselves, until it becomes clear that the main function of the multimodal features of the network is to visualise the processes that are going on in the mind of a traumatised murderer, who cannot function as a reliable narrator and assemble the various forms of the novel into a coherent whole.

### **The Final Trial and Interruption of Jay's Whole**

When Jay arrives at an underwater hideout, where he is forced to stand trial, he finally surrenders and it becomes clear that he cannot reliably guide the reader, even though this is what he still pretends to do. Instead, the trial, which takes the form of a play text and must be understood as the last element of the network so far, undermines Jay's narrative authority and keeps him from finishing his whole. When Jay arrives at the train station, he meets a man who looks like a dwarf and who was sent by Miss Glass to pick him up. They board a train to the underwater hideout, the world the dead now live in. As Cottier notes in the context of the novel's use of magical realism, "[w]hile the beginning of the story is told in a realist mode, recurring surrealist intrusions into plot and imagery – which are strongly reminiscent of magic realism – bring about a gradual change of mode, and the narrative ends in an imaginary, fantastic realm" (307). Having arrived in this fantastic realm, Jay's narrative is interrupted once more, this time by the text of a theatre play he is forced to watch. He introduces this switch himself, informing the reader that he will retell the incident without commenting on it: "What followed next, I shall not describe, I shall only report. I shall not comment lest you charge me later with deception. I shall not do anything to influence you. That's why I have to change the narrative itself, present events just as they were. The last act, so to speak, in this drama of the absurd. A play, in two short acts" (*Fireproof* 330). Jay finally surrenders even though he keeps addressing the reader

and pretends that he is still in charge of his actions and the story he is telling. However, the following two chapters are presented in the form of a play without a narrative mediator.



The play features Miss Glass, a book, a watch and a towel, the items that belonged to the characters mentioned in the three email attachments, whereas Jay is turned into an audience member who only passively describes the scene:

*The lights then travel behind the chairs, up above the wall, where the water cannot reach, where you can see three pictures, the pictures we saw earlier in the attachments: Tariq's burnt house, the burnt auto-rickshaw belonging to Shabnam's father and Father's burnt kitchen. But each picture now has been blown up, to almost life size, so you can see details that until now were invisible. Like the number of leaves in the sapling on the pavement outside the house, 17; the red and yellow lines on the No-Entry plate of the auto-rickshaw; in Abba's house, the ceiling fan burnt, its three blades twisted and drooped, like grey trousers left out to dry and the number of steel dishes, 9; the number of small white china plates, 8. After your eyes have registered these three pictures, you can now see clearly what lies on each chair. There is BOOK on the first chair from the left, WATCH in the middle and TOWEL on the last chair, the legs of each chair submerged in the water which reflects the lights in its ripples. (Fireproof 331-32, emphasis in the original)*

Miss Glass states at the beginning of the play that the three items – the book, the watch and the towel – “are here because they are eyewitnesses and they are earwitnesses. And unlike [...] [them], people who were killed, these three are objects. That's why their story will be objective. And their words will, therefore, carry more weight” (*Fireproof* 333). This circumstance also implies that the elements of Jay's whole, on the other hand, are not objective or reliable either. As Ilott adds, “[...] the parodic event can be read as a comment on a society in which objects are given a voice before humans, requiring readers critically to reconsider existing means of challenging the events and making perpetrators criminally responsible in a court of law” (672). Additionally, like the other multimodal features of the novel, the play scene is a suitable tool to visualise the thought processes of Jay's mind and his suppressed feelings of guilt. As Cottier adds, “Mr Jay succeeds in suppressing his past deeds until his murderous traits and his guilt manifest themselves in violent nightmares (257-64). But it is only when the dead call him to

trial and Watch, Towel, and Book incriminate him with their eyewitness accounts that his guilt becomes fully palpable” (312). The scene demonstrates that Jay is finally overwhelmed by his guilt and has never been able to provide the reader with reliable information. The photos, which are now presented to him in life-size so that he is able to see every little detail, symbolise the fact that his memories are gradually coming back. As Cottier notes in this context, “[i]n Jha’s novel, the different narrative levels correspond to the different levels at which memory work takes place” (307). Additionally, Jay is once more silenced for a long period of time as he is not supposed to actively participate in the play; he slowly surrenders and is forced to listen to the dead as his memory starts coming back. After the three objects have retold the stories of the three email attachments and therefore pointed out some important connections between the separate elements of the network, Jay notices that Ithim is no longer with him (cf. *Fireproof* 350). The second act that follows reveals the plan of the dead and the reasons why they gave Ithim, the fetus that was cut from the womb of a Muslim woman, to Jay: “And here was this young woman crying. She kept saying she wanted her baby to experience the world of the living. Even if just for a day, an hour, even five minutes” (*Fireproof* 353). Miss Glass afterwards explains their strategies and the purpose of the network in more detail: “We sent the gentleman several reminders of his guilt even as he took care of the baby; we sent him pictures of the three of you lying on the heap, we sent him the pictures that you see on stage. He looked and he looked but he did not see. [...] He read every word but he doesn’t admit it, even to himself. I doubt he ever will” (*Fireproof* 357-58). However, Miss Glass is convinced that their plan has been successful for the following reason: “Every time he looks at his own baby, which we have learnt is safe in the hospital, he will remember this one. The one that was deformed, that had been burnt [...]; he has to carry the burden of a story he can never tell” (*Fireproof* 358). After the trial, Jay runs back to the hospital, haunted by memories of his childhood, the images of the dead characters, and the fear that they will finally catch him (cf. *Fireproof* 360-75). He realises that he will not be able to escape and eventually admits that he is guilty and starts crying (cf. *Fireproof* 376).

### **A Story Taking Place in the Mind**

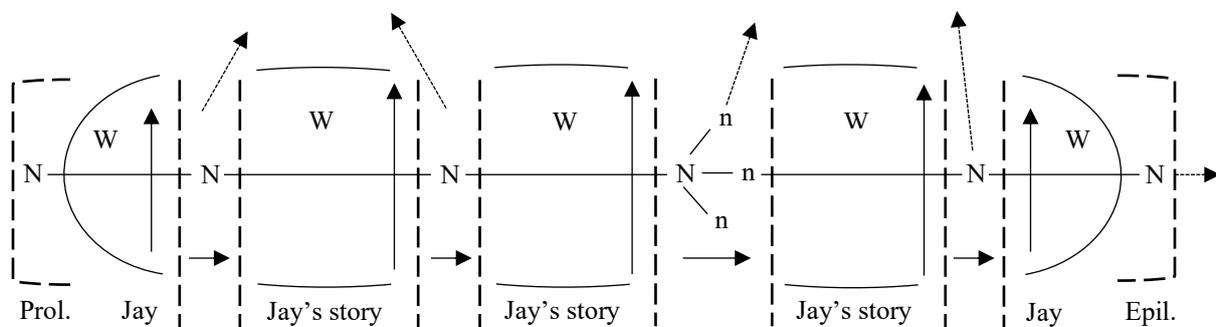
The ending suggests that the whole story has, in fact, only taken place in Jay’s mind; he is overwhelmed by his guilt and unable to provide the reader with a stable narrative framework within his whole. When he is sitting in the hospital, waiting to see his new-born baby for the first time, he is forced to look at the injured and dead people lying on the floor and starts

imagining their stories. In this situation, he is inevitably reminded of the fetus he or one of the other three attackers cut from the womb of the Muslim woman and imagines it to be his own child. He talks himself into believing that he can still save this child, but his thoughts are repeatedly interrupted when more and more corpses are carried into the hospital. He starts imagining their fates (in footnotes) and they keep interrupting his story of how he tries to save the dead fetus. He also makes up the stories of the hospital employees who suddenly go missing and the story of Miss Glass, and keeps pretending that he can still save the fetus. However, he finally surrenders to his feelings of guilt, knowing that his memories will keep haunting him for the rest of his life as the network of painful memories will continue to expand endlessly in the future. It is important to mention that there might be more possible interpretations and that this uncertainty is exactly what contributes to the novel's powerful impact. As Leena Kurvet-Käosaar notes in this context, "[w]hile presenting his interpretation of the events as neither a definitive account nor a story of closure, Jha underlines fiction's capacity for eliciting empathy, for enabling a kind of understanding that cannot be achieved in the same manner through other kinds of discourse, and for giving a voice to victims of violence that would otherwise remain unheard (children and the dead)" (319). The fact that the dead are actually more powerful than Jay and will keep haunting him for the rest of his life is emphasised in the novel's epilogue, in which they once more appear and inform the reader about their plight: "[...] they burnt down 12,000 houses where we lived, 14,000 shops where we made our living. That's a lot of empty shells, rectangles and squares" (*Fireproof* 379). They also add that "**Miss Glass says she has unfinished business. That just as we helped Ithim's mother by getting Mr Jay to admit his guilt, we have to help Tariq's, then Shabnam's. Go after others, she says**" (*Fireproof* 380, emphasis in the original). It becomes clear that the network will continue to expand in the future since the dead have decided to fight for justice and will therefore not only continue to haunt Jay but also search for other ruthless attackers involved in the riots.

It has become clear that the various forms employed in the novel visualise the mind's thought processes and Jay's attempt to suppress his traumatic memories. Escherle summarises the effects of the magical-realist mode of narration and the wide range of techniques the novel employs as follows:

[...] immediacy through strangeness, the shock of unfamiliarity, and confrontation with ignorance are powerful functions of the novel's representation of actual violence, individual pain, and individual guilt. They play a decisive role in undermining the authority of the grand narrative of the secularist Indian nation state. *Fireproof* does not create any new metanarrative to replace the old one. Instead, it can be said to make a plea for assigning the victims and their stories their rightful place in the existing grand narrative, which has to be revised and adapted accordingly. (208)

These effects are particularly created by employing elements of magical realism and various forms, including multimodal features, which meet and interrupt each other. These clashes of forms, which are particularly noticeable when elements of the network interrupt the whole Jay is trying to create, encourage readers to question Jay’s reliability and to think critically about the material they are presented with. With reference to negative reviews that criticise the novel’s inventive form, Ilott notes that “[s]uch criticisms suggest that the postmodern and playful style of the book is inappropriate to the harrowing subject matter, yet this fails to take into consideration the way that the style complements the material and works alongside it rather than detracting from it” (671). Further, “[s]eeking to represent the victims of the Gujarat violence without appropriating their trauma is a delicate authorial decision, and one that Jha has managed admirably by raising questions of silencing and subalternity without using a realist framework that would require answers, solutions and resolutions” (Ilott 671). Additionally, the interplay of realist and experimental elements, or of different forms that interrupt each other, may become a useful tool to appeal to readers’ emotions, to make it possible for them to identify with the situation and to encourage their active participation as they experience the painful act of remembering the way Jay does, which draws attention to the potentials of different narrative forms and their interactions.





## 6. From Fragmentation to Wholeness

The three novels that will be analysed in this chapter display a high degree of fragmentation in terms of form, employing multiple narrative strands, switches of narrators and perspectives, and multimodal features. Hence, there are various clashes of forms throughout the novels, reflecting on both Indian society's fragmentation due to the caste system, religious tensions or gender inequality, and the characters' experience of fragmentation in the aftermath of the many real-life incidents of violence the novels present, thus also blurring the line between fact and fiction. Nevertheless, all three novels finally create wholeness of some sort and achieve narrative closure. In Jha's *The City and the Sea*, which is loosely based on the 2012 Delhi gang rape case, the rape victim tells a story that could have happened if she had not been attacked, attempting to escape her painful reality. The woman imagines taking a trip to the Baltic Sea coast in Germany, while the son she will never be able to have due to the attack embarks on a journey through Delhi to find his missing mother in a parallel narrative. The two seemingly separate narrative strands gradually merge into one unified whole after laying bare both the victim's inner fragmentation in the sea chapters and the forces that keep dividing Delhi in the city chapters, criticising in particular male violence against women and raising questions about possible changes in the future. Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* provides an overview of various issues of contemporary Indian society, ranging from the inequalities caused by the caste system to the impact of globalisation and the Kashmir conflict. As reviewer Anita Felicelli notes with reference to Roy's second novel, "[i]f at times it's messy and unwieldy and hard to control, this chaos mirrors the identity of India itself" (n.p.). She adds that "[i]t is also the ultimate love letter to the richness and complexity of India – and the world – in all its hurly-burly, glorious, and threatened heterogeneity" (Felicelli n.p.). Nevertheless, the omniscient narrator, whose critical voice can be heard throughout the whole narrative, finally manages to connect the novel's main elements, creating a sense of closure despite the novel's heterogenous set-up. Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess* is also based on a real-life incident, namely the Kilvenmani massacre of untouchable peasants happening in 1968. Her novel features a narrator who is also close to the empirical author and opens up a strong metafictional dimension, continually reflecting on how to write a novel about a real-life massacre and thus forming the basis for an alternative truth the novel aims to establish. Kandasamy's fragmented narrative additionally employs a wide range of voices of both parties involved in the conflict but manages to create a sense of wholeness by gradually focusing more and

more on the perspectives of the victims and on the reader, who is finally put into the narrator's shoes and asked to keep up the newly-established counter-discourse.

The aim of this chapter is to analyse how the novels' various forms are arranged to reflect upon the construction of multiple layers of inner and outer fragmentation that characterise Indian society and its individuals, and how they interact with each other to create an impression of wholeness in the realm of fiction. This analysis will therefore demonstrate how the novels' formal arrangements reflect upon the deep divisions that run through Indian society, and, at the same time, upon the fight against these divisions by giving a voice to various victims of injustice.

## **6.1 Flowing into Each Other: Raj Kamal Jha's *The City and the Sea***

### **An Overview of Content and Form**

Raj Kamal Jha's latest novel is loosely based on the 2012 Delhi gang rape case surrounding 23-year-old psychotherapy student Jyoti Singh, who was violently attacked by a group of men on a public bus after returning from a night out at the cinema with a friend and died a few days later due to severe internal injuries. Instead of recounting the exact events of the incident, the novel tells a story that could have happened, presenting in two alternating narrative strands a woman who is taking a trip to the Baltic Sea in Germany and a boy in the city of Delhi who is desperately waiting for his mother to return home from work in the evening. The boy is unable to fall asleep after his father has reported the disappearance of his wife to the police, and then starts following December, another boy who suddenly turns up in his bedroom in the middle of the night to show him the way to his missing mother. They set out on a journey through the city that gradually drifts off into the realm of magical realism and leads them to the sea, where the boy is reunited with his mother, the woman the second narrative strand depicts in a snowy town on the German Baltic Sea coast. As reviewer N.S. Madhavan summarises the main events of the narrative, "[s]he has come out of a coma in a hospital and it is in her dream about the future that she is transported to a German city by the sea. While she abandons the city for the sea, in the city a boy is searching for his lost mother. One of the perpetrators of the crime, the juvenile, is also seen journeying through the labyrinthine city" (n.p.). It turns out at the end of the novel that the woman, who attempts to escape her painful reality, only imagines visiting the sea and also weaves the story of the husband and son she could have had in the future in a parallel narrative.

The novel continually places emphasis on the contrast between the city, where the unnamed and imaginary son of the rape victim lives, and the quiet place on the Baltic Sea coast the woman has escaped to. Additionally, the narrative strand of the boy focuses on action, whereas the story of the woman places emphasis on her emotions in a stream-of-consciousness manner. Hence, the former depicts the city's outer fragmentation, with clear divisions between (male) attackers and (female) victims, whereas the latter focuses on one of the victims' inner fragmentation. The two stories, which are told in alternating chapters, must therefore be understood as two separate wholes whose various pieces keep interrupting each other and place emphasis on the contrasts that exist between them but do not compete for dominance; they complement each other instead of forming a system of hierarchies. As Madhavan also notes in his review of the novel, "[t]he city, the sea, the boy, the mother, the crowd, the loneliness, the sounds within and without – Jha takes us through a fascinating journey of binaries" (n.p.). Even though the alternating chapters develop a regular rhythm and the novel therefore appears to be neatly structured, there are, in fact, many blurry lines as it turns out that there is also a sea in the city, *The Sea*. However, this blurring of lines also makes it clear that the two stories, whose separate pieces gradually start flowing into each other, must be connected in some way. When mother and son are reunited at the end of the novel, it turns out that the boy is only an imaginary construct of the woman, who has disappeared in the city's Sea but would have liked to visit the Baltic Sea coast with her family one day. The two narrative strands thus merge into one whole, finally overcoming both the inner and outer sense of fragmentation the novel has conveyed in the two separate stories. Even though in this case this sense of wholeness can only be brought about by death, the novel's final passages also generate hope for the future. Additionally, since Jha does not retell the exact circumstances surrounding the incident but opts for a story that could have happened and focuses on the journey of two children, one of them the perpetrator of the crime, the novel is less interested in the past than in the future and the question of what (male) children may turn into. As Jha notes himself in an interview conducted by Sonal Shah,

[i]n the novel, December is guilty and breaks down in the end, he has to pay for what he has done. But art needs to ask the question that's unasked: who is December? Is he the child of someone we know? Someone we work for? The brother, father, son, friend, colleague of someone we are acquainted with? What's he being taught in school? Is he going to school? Who are the women in his life? Instead, the discourse is: Hang him if you can, otherwise lock him up, throw the keys away. But where more than half a billion are men and women under 25, that can't be *The Solution*. There are too many of them and their paths are going to intersect. If we want to explore what needs to be done to ensure our women are safe, we need to talk about what needs to be done to keep our boys human. (Jha qtd. in Shah n.p.)

The novel implies that the victims of past attacks can, unfortunately, not be saved anymore but that social changes are needed right now to avoid more tragic incidents in the future. This idea is reflected by the way the novel's structural forms interact with each other, conveying a strong sense of inner and outer fragmentation in the two separate stories that is overcome when they merge at the end of the narrative to provide a glimpse into the future.

### The Prologue and the Sea Chapters: The First Whole

The novel starts with a prologue in which the woman first speaks in the first person, thus seemingly establishing a narrative hierarchy that may be valid throughout the whole novel before it becomes clear that the woman is mentally unstable and unable to cope with her sense of inner fragmentation. Before she starts losing control of her narrative, she announces in the prologue that she will tell a story that could have happened, attempting to escape her painful reality:

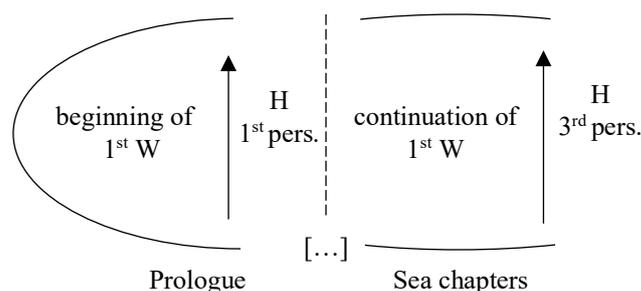
Freeze this frame.

A child happy, excited, at being able to open a hotel door for the first time, all by himself, just like an adult, his parents waiting to walk into the room to change for dinner on the first day of their first overseas holiday.

This is what could have happened.

This is what could have been. (*The City and the Sea* xiv)

However, it soon becomes clear that the woman is all alone at the moment, which she states explicitly at the end of the prologue: "There is no one behind me now, my husband is gone, he must have fallen into the chasm that's gaped open at my feet. And, in front, where our room was, where my child was pushing the door open, welcoming us in, there is only the dark and there is only the missing, there is the city and the sea" (*The City and the Sea* xv). Even though it is already indicated that the woman is mentally unstable, she pretends to be in control of the narrative to follow. However, the switch from first to third person at the beginning of her story underlines the circumstance that she is losing control of her narrative.



When the heterodiegetic narrator takes over, the sea is first depicted as a peaceful place: “*Snow is falling, she stands at the plate-glass window. In the room in the hotel in the silent town by the quiet sea. This is the first time she is watching snow; she wants a clear view, not one that’s interrupted by glass even if it is, like this one, so spectacularly clean and cold. With not one blemish*” (*The City and the Sea* 11, emphasis in the original). The narrator further conveys a frozen and static image of the place by the sea: “*There’s absolutely no wind outside, each leafless branch in each tree is still, dusted snow-white*” (*The City and the Sea* 11, emphasis in the original). When the woman talks to the receptionist of the hotel she is staying at, she is further told that she has “*chosen the best time to visit, there is no crowd in this city, the beach is empty at this time, even the sea is empty, Ms Muller continues, we face Denmark, Sweden, Finland, so it’s pretty quiet here. [...] Ms Muller is right, this place is empty. There is no one in the hotel today, she can see that, she can feel that*” (*The City and the Sea* 28, emphasis in the original). The emptiness of the place the woman is staying in comes to reflect the emptiness that now expands inside her, even though “[s]he likes this emptiness. This awareness that she won’t run into anybody, that there may be no one on the street, not one person. This suits her fine” (*The City and the Sea* 29, emphasis in the original). What might initially seem to be a favourable circumstance in contrast to the hustle and bustle of the city soon turns out to be a painful emptiness that reflects the woman’s emotional state, which already becomes clear when she shortly afterwards

*decides she will step out of the hotel, into the silence and into the empty.*

*Maybe take a walk in the neighbourhood, get the wind and the snow in her hair and her face.*

*When there’s no one looking or listening, she wants to talk to herself, too.*

*She wants to speak a word out loud.*

*The Word.*

*In English, Hindi.*

*In foreign languages.*

*Zorlama (Azerbaijani).*

*Eroszak (Hungarian).*

*Bortxaketa (Basque).*

*Vergewaltigen (German).*

[...]

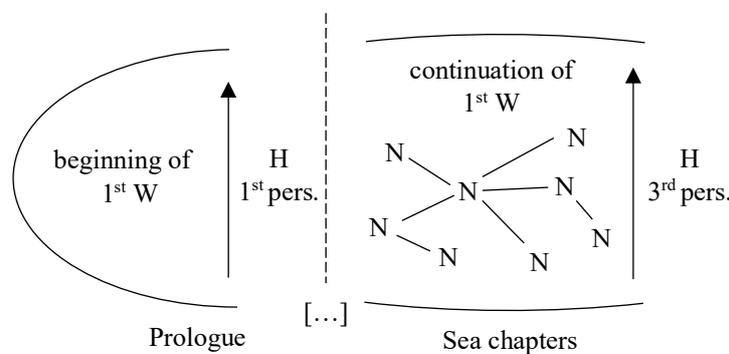
*She wants to hear herself speak this word.*

*Because unless she says it out loud, no one will hear and unless she says it out loud, how will she know that she still has the capacity to speak, how will she be sure that she is alive? (The City and the Sea 30-31, emphasis in the original)*

Her urge to say the painful word out loud is an attempt to overcome the emptiness and the silence that are situated deep inside her and that surround her at the same time. Madhavan notes in this context that, “[a]ll through the book, he [Jha] has succeeded in conveying that he is writing about the unsaid: A novel about silences” (n.p.).

### A Network within the First Whole

The circumstance that the woman is struggling against this silence is emphasised by the blank lines between her different snippets of thought, which are printed in italics throughout the whole novel and form a contrast to the city passages, which convey a stronger sense of flow and focus on action as the boy and December embark on their journey through The Sea, a journey that finally leads them to the silent sea as well. As Madhavan points out in his review, “Jha’s book alternates between the city and the beach. Disjointed images are arrayed. The writer is relying on the gestalt, rather than vanilla storytelling. It is cinematic” (n.p.), particularly in the narrative strand, or whole, focusing on the sea. The pieces that make up this whole focus on the protagonist’s emotions in a stream-of-consciousness manner and are arranged into a horizontal network; the static and often unrelated images of this network reflect the woman’s inner fragmentation and attempts to escape reality. As the connections between the various images are not always clear, they create an adequate impression of the woman’s sense of inner fragmentation, with the different snippets of thought and memory turning into the elements of a network that may expand in various directions within her whole.



The narrator later adds that “[s]he has never heard silence like this. So big and so deep that she hears sounds from inside her” (*The City and the Sea* 79, emphasis in the original). The

narrator then describes this in more detail, with the different impressions being separated by blank lines on the page; she can hear sounds

*[o]f blood flowing, for example, or not flowing, curving around the bends in her veins.*

*The draught of the cold snow-laden air filling the warm sacs in her lungs.*

*Her weak muscle and white bone pressing against each other, moving involuntarily.*

*The spring in her mattress weakly protesting, the sheets whispering to the pillows as they adjust to her arms and her legs, her head and her hair.*

*She hears sounds from outside as well.*

*The street breathing when a car drives by. In a long-drawn sigh made up of sounds she has never heard so clearly before: purr of engine, hard rubber tyres on wet street, low hiss of exhaust, crush of melted snow, splash of water. (The City and the Sea 79, emphasis in the original)*

The blank lines visually set apart the different impressions the woman is having, impressions of sounds that she can hear inside herself or outside on the street and that would normally remain unnoticed. The blank lines further imply that time has slowed down for the woman as she has drifted off into a world that is far away from the city. In addition to the fact that she feels the need to step outside to say the word ‘rape’ and to prove to herself that she is still alive, it becomes clear that she feels broken. At the beginning of one of the following chapters, for instance, the narrator reveals that, “[a]s part of her performance called ‘Promise Piece’ at London’s Jeanette Cochrane Theater in the year 1966, artist Yoko Ono broke a vase on stage and asked members of her audience to pick up its pieces and take them home, promising that they would meet again in ten years with the pieces and put the vase together again. Why she remembers this, she doesn’t know” (*The City and the Sea* 43, emphasis in the original). The narrator further reveals that the woman starts thinking about where and when she might have come across this incident (cf. *The City and the Sea* 43), before adding that “she herself was a vase once. And, just like Yoko Ono’s, she, too, was broken. On some kind of a stage, and there were people watching” (*The City and the Sea* 43, emphasis in the original). The narrator keeps emphasising the fact that she feels shattered and that

*[s]everal of her pieces are missing.*

*She has only one eye, part of her face isn’t there.*

*Her lips are deeply bruised, the lower one is bitten, cut deep, her entire chin is smashed in.*

*One shoulder is crushed, one arm droops, limp.*

*The yellow-white hint of bare bone.*

*She has bled so much she feels dry inside. She looks down, and where her stomach should be, there's nothing except black. (The City and the Sea 44, emphasis in the original)*

She is also suffering from loss of memory, particularly her short-term memory, which becomes clear in the following chapters that focus on the woman and add pieces to this first whole. The narrator reveals that “[s]he doesn’t remember many things, her name to begin with” (*The City and the Sea* 63, emphasis in the original), when she looks at her phone and tries to remember why the screen is scratched. She does not remember her phone number either but is at least able to recall the lyrics of her ringtone: “*It’s a song. It plays in her head. Green Day. The words come in fragments. Lonely road. Images float in, bringing with them more detail. Billie Joe Armstrong, that name she remembers. He’s the singer – that she is sure of*” (*The City and the Sea* 63, emphasis in the original). She is able to remember details that do not affect her personally, but her mind blanks out the images of the cruel attack she must have fallen victim to. Nevertheless,

*[s]he wishes to walk to the sea. If she is lucky, she thinks, she may get to watch the large liners that move from continent to continent, ocean to ocean, past coastal towns like this one where she is.*

*She wants to watch one such ship, she has never seen one, and she is already so many years old.*

*She doesn’t remember her age.*

*Let me get ready, she tells herself. (The City and the Sea 93, emphasis in the original)*

The woman appears to be absent-minded and is only able to process information she is confronted with in the present moment as her memory is fading. When the receptionist tells her to put on a fleece jacket as it is cold outside and the sea is a fifteen-minute walk away, the woman is only able to focus on the appearance of the jacket: “*Thank you, she says, slipping into the jacket. It’s red. She likes the feel of the fur in its hood nuzzle against her chin. Like the soft, warm back of a pet, loving, a little dog she’s holding close*” (*The City and the Sea* 93, emphasis in the original). Her will to escape reality is emphasised when she arrives at the sea and drifts off into a childhood memory that is triggered by the sight of a duck on the snowy grass and that once more helps her to forget the situation she is in at the moment:

*A large duck glides out from between the grass, white feathers and yellow beak, moonbeams reflected in its rippling wake.*

*She remembers.*

*Just one scene, frozen as in a picture.*

*From a holiday she once took with her parents.*

*A bird park not far from the city.*

*It was winter, her father had said that cranes from Siberia had arrived at the lake in the park, the newspaper had a report, he had seen it on TV too, and we should go early, just when the park opens, before the crowd comes in, so that we can watch them undisturbed. (The City and the Sea 125-26, emphasis in the original)*

The blank lines between the different details she remembers indicate that her memory is only slowly coming back. She feels drawn into this world of her childhood and wishes to escape into it when she sits down on the snowy grass:

*She sits down on the grass, snow crunches under her feet, the ends of her jacket dip into a puddle but it doesn't matter, the material is waterproof.*

*She feeds the duck, watching it carefully. She wishes to remember the details, the starlight bouncing off its feathers, the chill numbing her fingers when she dips them into the creek.*

*She wishes she can reduce in size to a girl so small that she can sit on the duck and swim away, in between the grass, the stalks brushing against her face, getting tangled in her hair, into a place deep inside the creek where she can hide and no one will ever come to seek, where she will be safe. (The City and the Sea 127, emphasis in the original)*

She wishes to escape to a world in which she could be safe, hoping to be able to leave behind the emptiness that extends around and inside her as the silence slowly turns into a menacing force. The memory from her childhood generates a rather vivid image even though the trip to the bird park also took place in winter. However, she was accompanied by her family and felt safe, not drifting off into a silent world that threatens to swallow her whole. When she gets closer to the pier in the next sea chapter, she encounters a group of school children that may finally disturb the silence, even though it is not mentioned explicitly. Additionally, the narrator notes that “[t]he children cannot see her because she is at a distance from the shore. Even if they turn to look, they are unlikely to spot her in the dark, through the mist and the lattice of tree trunks that line the edge of the beach. Which in a way, is just what she wants. Because that’s how it should be: they should not be aware of her so that she can remain unobtrusive, watch them play” (The City and the Sea 163, emphasis in the original). The woman seems to realise that she is not part of this world anymore, which is the real reason why the children are unable to see her. At the same time, they seem to be part of the world she would like to go back to, the peaceful world she inhabited during her childhood. In contrast, she now feels as if she has fallen apart, projecting her mental and physical pain onto the children when she can suddenly “see bullet holes in each child, in each small frame, a

*dot from where she is, tiny, its edges charred, the perimeter of each stained with crusted blood. Holes in the back, on the forehead, in the chest, above one eye, in the back again. They are walking too close to the edge of the beach. She wishes to call out to them, tell them not to go so far out but the sea is unusually calm, the waves are gentle” (The City and the Sea 164, emphasis in the original). When she goes to the hotel’s restaurant after returning from the beach, she notices that it is completely empty, and she cannot find anyone who might potentially serve her. However, when “[s]he turns to leave, she jumps with a start at the sight of four people standing in a group, two men and two women, all of the same height and build, wearing hospital-white smocks, barely a couple of feet away from her” (The City and the Sea 188, emphasis in the original). When she expresses the wish to order some food, the people respond that they will help her and that she will not even have to bite, chew or digest since they will give her all that her body needs in a different way (cf. *The City and the Sea* 197). A few moments later, she is taken to an unknown room, and, after being undressed, “[s]he sees the drip being pushed towards her face, latex gloves press down on her lips, then at her wrist. A needle probes, finds her vein. A machine begins to hum, a monitor beeps” (*The City and the Sea* 199, emphasis in the original). The narrative is interrupted by a city chapter at this point, and, in the following one, which focuses on the sea again, the woman is overwhelmed by questions:*

*But where is her bag, her suitcase? Did her luggage reach the hotel?*

*She is going to drag herself down, ask Ms Muller the questions she has.*

*Where have I come from?*

*Do you have an address for me?*

*What’s my name?*

*How long am I staying here?*

*Who are those four people in smocks and gloves, what have they done to me?*

*But what will Ms Muller think?*

*Will she even have answers to any of these questions?*

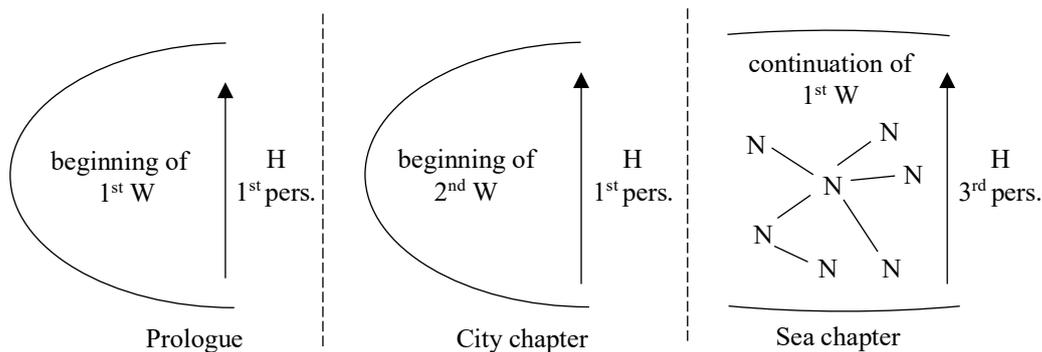
*Who knows how Ms Muller may react, she may call the police, tell them here is a woman who is lost and missing, she is a foreigner, she is cold and she is hurt, she’s just back from the sea, she doesn’t know who she is, please take her away, can we find a way to send her to the place she came from? (The City and the Sea 210, emphasis in the original)*

The woman still thinks that she is in a hotel on the Baltic Sea coast and does not remember any details surrounding the attack. This whole of the novel therefore lays bare in a stream-of-consciousness manner the way the victim suffers and places emphasis on her inner

fragmentation after the cruel attack. In order to endure her painful situation, she tries to blank out reality by imagining the silent place on the Baltic Sea coast she had always wanted to visit during her lifetime. However, reality sneaks back into the narrative at the end of the sea chapter in which she is taken to the hospital room, and in the city chapters, which make up the other whole, even though the boy is also part of the woman’s imagination, gradually blurring the seemingly rigid lines between the two places.

### The City Chapters: The Second Whole

While the sea resort is depicted as a silent and deserted place that comes to reflect the woman’s inner fragmentation, the city is described as a crowded and harmful one, dividing its inhabitants into victims and attackers. The city chapters must be understood as the pieces of a separate whole that are put together in a fairly linear fashion, therefore conveying a greater sense of flow as the two boys embark on their journey through the city, and seemingly allowing reality to find its way back into the narrative.



When the boy notices the disappearance of his mother, he affirms that he will do anything to find her, that he will “stand behind Metro pillars, in pools of shade, look for Ma in the stream of traffic that swirls in eddies of wheels and light” (*The City and the Sea* 3). Shortly before the boy intends to start searching for her, he notes that his mother had referred to the dark side of the city as “The Sea. T and S, upper case” (*The City and the Sea* 17). He adds that “Ma has always talked about travelling to the sea, t and s in lower case, the one with water and waves, dolphins and whales. The deep blue, the endless expanse” (*The City and the Sea* 17). He thus draws attention to the contrast between the city and the sea, or, strictly speaking, between The Sea and the sea, already making it clear at this point that the two separate wholes must be connected in some way. In the following, the boy reveals to the reader how his mother had once described The Sea to him:

The Sea is visible sometime, invisible at another, above the ground and below the surface. It's there, it's not there. You need to look with your eyes open, there's no border sharply defined, no shore, no coast, The Sea creeps up on you, just like that. Through the countless things that make it up. Things we throw away, dead and disused, needless and hopeless. Garbage unattended for days, unlimited in size and sprawl, dry and wet. That no one clears and, therefore, keeps piling up, 24 by 7 by 60 by 60, each second, day by day, night by night. The Sea collects the things we lose. [...] Whose absence, like their presence, is hardly felt. Not just things but people, too. The Sea shelters the lost and the missing. Men, women, children. Dogs and cats, cows and buffaloes, birds that have forgotten their way, split from their flock. Even an ant that's gone astray. All this The Sea traps in its endless depths. (*The City and the Sea* 18)

The boy's mother is aware of what is happening in The Sea as she works as a journalist, and she once had a conversation with her son about why it is important to know about this dark side of the city:

Many of these stories and pictures that I edit are from The Sea, she said, about people who live there, things that happen to them. If we don't put these stories out, no one will get to know what's happening in The Sea.

Why is that important, I asked, why do we need to know about The Sea?

What kind of a question is that, Ma said, if you want to live in this city, you can never run away from The Sea so why not get to know what's happening there? That way, you will always be prepared.

Prepared for what? I asked.

When someone from The Sea comes visiting, she said.

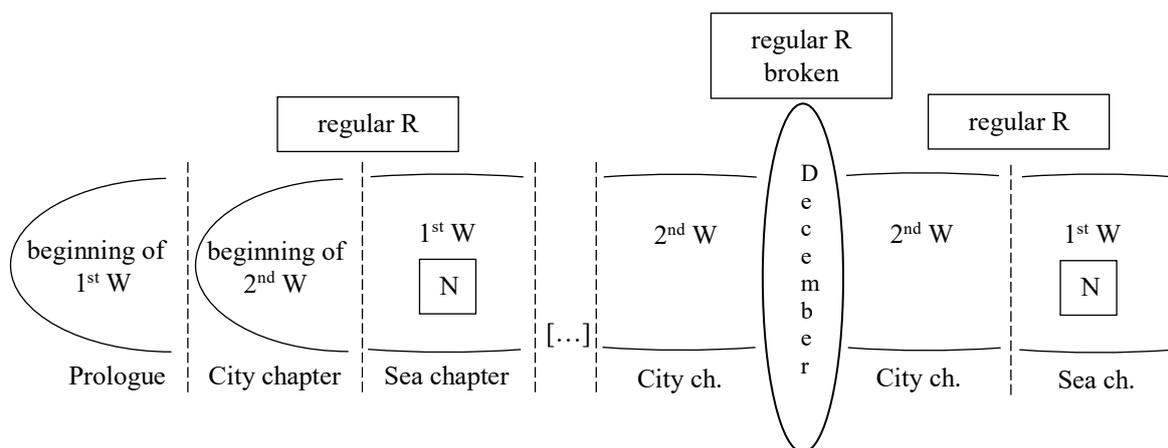
I didn't understand what she meant, it was 3 p.m., her shift was over, it was time to go home. (*The City and the Sea* 21)

The Sea, which the boy repeatedly refers to in the course of his whole, is described as a harmful and dark place for the dead and the missing of the city and gradually draws the boy into its depths as well. In contrast to the static stream-of-consciousness passages that make up the network that unfolds within the woman's whole, the parallel narrative conveys a sense of flow as the boy and December set out on their dangerous trip through The Sea. Nevertheless, "[t]he boy's travels through the city, too, assume a dream-like quality" (n.p.), as Madhavan points out. When the police have left the house and the boy is still unable to fall asleep, one of his mother's newspapers suddenly comes to life and turns its pages, so that he is able to look at the articles, "[s]tories and photographs from The Sea" (*The City and the Sea* 85), including a missing person report of Sonam, a 25-year-old woman (cf. *The City and the Sea* 86) who will later on appear in both of the novel's wholes. After reading several of the articles, the boy suddenly hears "a scream that slammed in through the dark, through the open window, three words from The Sea. The scream was an order, a command: Let us go" (*The City and the Sea* 86). The boy is unable to make sense of what is happening around him

until he notices a child standing in front of his window (cf. *The City and the Sea* 88). At this point, the narrative is interrupted by a sea chapter, leaving the reader in the dark about who this child is or what he might want from the boy. After the sea chapter, which focuses on the woman's walk along the beach, the boy reveals in the next city chapter that, "[l]ifting itself up from The Sea, the child skipped, hopped over the countless undulations on its surface, indifferent to what lay below its feet, to what it had disturbed or dislodged, until it reached the edge where the wall of our house began" (*The City and the Sea* 97), subtly indicating that there must be a closer connection between the woman's sea and the boy's Sea. Hence, the pieces of the two separate wholes gradually begin to merge into one, even though this is not yet visible in terms of structure. The boy later notices that "[t]here was blood on his [December's] hands" (*The City and the Sea* 98) but nevertheless decides to follow him into The Sea when the unknown child tells him that he knows the way to his mother (cf. *The City and the Sea* 102-103). As Vrinda Nabar adds, "[t]he story steps out of the pages in magical realism mode as December ushers the boy through shanties and highways, landing up eventually in his village and his home" (n.p.). During this magical realist journey, the boy keeps describing The Sea in detail: "So, this was The Sea that Ma had told me about, the second city undercover and underground, mostly invisible, now come to life, teeming with the lost and the forgotten, the dead and the missing. People packed so close I couldn't take a step without brushing against them. Men, women and children. Sitting and standing, alone and in groups" (*The City and the Sea* 112). The boy further notices that "The Sea was in perpetual motion" (*The City and the Sea* 112) and that "all of this movement, all these faces, were draped in a silence as immense as The Sea itself. So quiet that it was only when I strained my ears to listen, that I could hear sounds – fall of feet, scraping of clothes, rise and fall of arms, breathing in and out; the beating of many hearts. In the crowd, there were the newly dead as well" (*The City and the Sea* 113). Hence, there is a clear difference between the noisy city during the day and The silent Sea that comes alive after the sun has set and is, in contrast to the static images conveyed by the sea chapters, continuously in motion during the night. However, just like the Baltic Sea with playing children on its shore, The Sea is not always completely silent, as the boy notes: "In the silence, as we walked, there were [...] snatches of sound. Mostly from women. A shout, words jumbled, incoherent. Another woman crying that sounded like laughing that, a little later, sounded like crying again" (*The City and the Sea* 113). These observations indicate that there are contrasts but also more and more parallels between The Sea and the sea, which have so far not appeared within the same whole.

### December's Notes: Breaking the Regular Rhythm

The regular rhythm of the alternating city and sea chapters is broken once by a chapter that focuses on December, providing an insight into the mind of a character responsible for the creation of The Sea and hence the city's division into attackers and victims. The boy and December continue walking through The Sea for a long period of time until they reach a road with a row of open houses on one side of it. They see Sonam in one of these houses and December tells the boy that they will spend the night in that house as well. As the boy is still not able to fall asleep, he takes a closer look at the sheets of paper December is carrying around in his bag. At this point, the regular rhythm the narrative has been following so far is broken since the chapter following this city chapter does not move back to the Baltic Sea coast but presents what is written on December's sheets of paper as the boy starts reading them.



Nabar notes in this context that “[c]rammed into his bag are crumpled pages of what reads like a confession from which disturbingly familiar images spill out: a bus driver urging a group that included December to go on a joy ride and find a woman; a young woman and her male friend who were duped into boarding the bus; the iron rod with which they were attacked; and so on” (n.p.). This confession must be understood as a separate whole, thus emphasising the opposition that exists between the boy and December, even though December had so far been part of the boy’s whole. The opening lines of the confession state the following: “My name is ~~XXXXXXXX~~. This is my confession, this is not my defence. Because I have none” (*The City and the Sea* 135). The boy continues reading the confession, which reveals December’s life story and is written in the first person (cf. *The City and the Sea* 135-55). December first outlines his family’s situation, revealing that his mother is a maid and his father a carpenter, who has been unable to work since an accident. The family therefore struggle to survive,

forcing December to move to the city in order to find employment there. He first starts working as a waiter in a restaurant but is dismissed one day as the owner accuses him of having stolen money from him. One of the customers feels sorry for December and starts employing him on his farm afterwards. However, he soon dismisses December as well, accusing him of having killed his parrot. December claims that he was innocent in both cases even though there is evidence against him. Nevertheless, the milkman helps him find a new position, taking him to an AC restaurant whose owner is a friend of his. One day, a bus driver steps into the restaurant, offering him a new job on his bus due to his voice: “I need your voice, Driver said, I need someone to call out to passengers, to make sure they board my bus, not anybody else’s” (*The City and the Sea* 149). December accepts the offer, accompanying the bus driver to the city slum he lives in. One evening, the driver invites him and some other friends over to his house, making the following suggestion when he receives a call from his boss, who tells him to fill up the bus’s tank for the next day: “Let’s take the bus out, he said, let’s have some fun. Let’s try to get a woman, Driver said. Yes, let’s get ourselves a woman, the others said. All five of us boarded the bus” (*The City and the Sea* 153). The driver asks December to call out for passengers as usual, whereupon a man and a woman board the bus. Then, as December reports, “[t]he bus was moving very fast, swerving. [...] Driver’s friends were beating up the man. The woman shouted, stop the bus, let us get out, she screamed but no one heard. As we, as I” (*The City and the Sea* 155). The confession ends in mid-sentence, omitting the details of the violent attack and the rape that presumably follow. As this confession breaks the regular rhythm of the alternating chapters and therefore forms its own whole, it draws special attention to the criminals who keep dividing the city and create The Sea at night; the disruptive impact they have on the city is thus reflected by the novel’s structure. When December and the boy later arrive at December’s home village, he finally admits that he is guilty while sitting on his mother’s lap but once more omits the exact details of his actions. As the boy notes,

[h]e [December] sat crumpled on her bed, shrunk to less than half his height although his face remained unchanged, its size and its lines, making him look like a dwarf, his head pressed to his mother’s chest. He was crying. [...] I heard the quiver in his body, the movement of the bed as he twitched and trembled and, in between the tears, I heard December say: I did it. I was also there, I did it. There were others too but I did it. Yes, say it, speak it out aloud, said his mother, rocking him as if he were a baby, his siblings had gathered around the bed and had begun to block my view of him. (*The City and the Sea* 222)

As Nabar points out in this context, “[i]n a verbal catharsis he now admits what had been insinuated but left unsaid, and points the boy through a curtain as it were, into a region where

the city and the sea merge in an unexpected finale” (n.p.). In the final chapter, the boy intends to tell his mother this story about December: “I will share with her his story, what I read in those sheets of paper he carried with him, I will tell her what he said in the end, that he was the one who was guilty, tears flowing down his face, when he had shrunk to half his size, his head in his mother’s lap” (*The City and the Sea* 258). The perpetrator is reduced to a powerless child and only granted one chapter to reveal his life story in the first person, which mainly serves as a confession. When he returns to his mother, it becomes clear that he will have to live with his guilt forever and that he cannot move on in life anymore. This is additionally reflected by the fact that his story ends after his confession, indicating that he is stuck in his separate whole and cannot move on, even though he is just a child.

### **A Network of Victims**

When the boys continue their journey the next day, the division between victims and attackers in the city is emphasised once more. Before reaching his mother’s house, where he makes the confession, December leads the boy “to a group of five men huddled around a fire” (*The City and the Sea* 172), the other attackers mentioned in his written confession. After meeting the attackers, December and the boy are forced to swim through a drain that is positioned on the other side of the road and also part of The Sea:

The drain was a part of The Sea, choked, as Ma had warned me, with things lost and abandoned, forgotten and thrown away. Bottles crumpled and twisted, bags tied and untied. Complete sets of clothes, discarded shorts, trousers and shirts, tops and bottoms. Of kids and grown-ups. One sock twisted into knots, a hole in its heel. A flash of colour, from a sari, torn. There were carcasses. Of birds. Pigeons fallen from low-hanging electricity wires, charred to death. [...] There was hospital dressing, too. [...] And then there were the living and the dying. (*The City and the Sea* 174-75)

On the embankment on the other side of the drain, they encounter people who have gone missing the same night as the boy’s mother, and “[e]ach one had, around his or her neck, a card which was printed exactly in the format that Ma had designed for Sonam’s announcement in the newspaper” (*The City and the Sea* 177). In the following, these cards, which must be considered one separate form within the boy’s whole, are visually presented on the page and contain information on the victims. The first card reads:

**Sharda Singh**

Female, Age 22, Height 152, Eyes Black,  
Complexion Fair, Face Oval, Hair Normal Black,  
missing from Vivek Vihar, Father Nepal Singh.

*(The City and the Sea 178)*

After looking at the cards of many more victims, the boy notes that “[t]here were children too” (*The City and the Sea* 184), whose cards are presented on one page:

**Ambica**

Girl, 6, red frock and green slippers.

**Bhola**

Boy, 8, white pyjamas and blue short.

*(The City and the Sea 184)*

With the exception of the two boxes of the children, which appear on the same page, each of the cards is placed in the middle of a blank page, visually conveying the impression of isolation and the vastness of The Sea, in which the victims are now caught. The cards therefore come to reflect the deep divisions and sense of outer fragmentation that are omnipresent in the city. Additionally, they form their own network within the boy’s whole, reflecting The Sea’s ability to randomly connect people from various backgrounds by drawing them into its depths. The structure of a network further implies that it could potentially expand endlessly, indicating that more and more people might be drawn into The Sea every night. As Anil Menon adds in his review, “The Sea has the same philosophy as Microsoft’s recycle bin: everything that’s erased ends up in The Sea, but nothing is ever truly uncreated” (n.p.), meaning that both the victims’ relatives and the perpetrators themselves will have to live with the consequences of their actions for the rest of their lives.

**Connecting the Two Wholes**

Throughout the stories of the two wholes, there are several hints that The Sea and the sea must be connected as the separate pieces start flowing into each other. There already are a few explicit hints that the two are connected when, during their trip through The Sea, the

boy “heard music, a song from a radio maybe. A tune on a cellphone. The same one that Ma had, ‘*Boulevard of broken dreams*’, Ma’s ringtone was playing but when [he] turned to look, there was a man carrying the phone” (*The City and the Sea* 114). The next moment, the boy even notices Sonam in The Sea, the woman he already read an article about when the newspaper had suddenly come alive, and who also appears on the Baltic Sea coast in the other whole: “*Face Oval, Complexion Fair, Hair Normal Black, Wearing dark red salwar, light green suit*” (*The City and the Sea* 115, emphasis in the original). The boy sees Sonam again when they reach the road with a row of houses on its right-hand side: “In one corner, sat Sonam. The woman we had just seen appear and disappear, whose picture and Missing Person notice was in the newspaper page Ma had made. What was she doing in the open house? Was this a sign that we were getting nearer to Ma? Would she know where Ma was? I couldn’t tell as I sat down” (*The City and the Sea* 119). When they enter the house, he asks her whether she knows something about the disappearance of his mother, but she does not respond. Then, as the boy reports, “Sonam moved, turned so that she faced away, her back towards [him] now. She lowered her head as if to show [him] the deep red welt running around the nape of her neck like a ghostly ornament which rode on one side, up to her ear where it disappeared into her hair. A perfect impression of a rope used for hanging” (*The City and the Sea* 120). The passage reveals why Sonam is now part of The Sea, which can be accessed from the city of Delhi and from the Baltic Sea coast. Shortly afterwards, Sonam therefore also appears in one of the sea chapters of the other whole. When the woman of this whole steps onto the pier, she encounters another woman and is able to start a conversation with her as she is, in contrast to the children, already part of her world:

*This woman is in a dark red salwar and a light green suit. She sits on a bench. She looks like age twenty-five, height 157 cm. The face is oval, the complexion fair, hair is normal black.*

*What’s your name? What are you doing here, in this town, she asks her.*

*This woman, too, looks at the sea, the wind roars in her hair which blows into her eyes, covers her lips, she does nothing to resist.*

*My name is Sonam, the woman says, I have run away from home, I have run away from my father.*

*Have you had something to eat? To drink? Don’t be shy, if you need something, I have a room in a hotel here, you can come there.*

*No, I just want to sit here, I am very tired, says Sonam. My father put out a notice in a newspaper that I am missing and I need to be found but I don’t. I don’t want him to find me. (*The City and the Sea* 166, emphasis in the original)*

Even though both women are missing and therefore part of The Sea, Sonam asks the other woman to leave her alone (cf. *The City and the Sea* 167). Shortly afterwards, this woman notices that “[t]he children have left the beach, they must have returned to where they came from” (*The City and the Sea* 167, emphasis in the original). She makes it clear that she does not know what place the children had come from but implies that they have not fallen into the sea or The Sea. It further indicates that they live in worlds now far apart and that the children have, in contrast to Sonam and her, managed to find their way back home. As Sonam tells the woman that she wishes to be left alone, she is able to communicate with her, indicating that the two women are already part of the same place at that time, The Sea and the world of the dead.

After several hints on the content level that the two seemingly separate wholes must be connected in some way, they also become more and more intertwined in structural terms, with The Sea gradually turning into the sea and creating a sense of wholeness at the end of the novel. When the woman of the whole that is set on the Baltic Sea coast finds herself lying in the hospital room, she hears the voice of her son:

*This time, there is a voice that follows the knock.*

*Ma, it says, may I come in.*

*She runs into the bathroom, quickly puts her clothes back on, she feels her heart quicken.*

*Ma, the voice says again, are you there, Ma? May I come in?*

*Who is that, who is calling her Ma? (The City and the Sea 229, emphasis in the original)*

The chapter ends at this point, and the following city chapter moves back to the boy and December. The boy has by now realised that December and his friends are responsible for the disappearance of his mother. After leaving the drain, they board December’s bus and drive to his village, where he meets his desperate family (cf. *The City and the Sea* 213-21). December and his mother then tell the boy to enter their barn, where he suddenly starts falling and ends up in a hospital in an unfamiliar city (cf. *The City and the Sea* 233-38). He walks down the corridor and finds his mother’s room at the end of it: “The door was closed. Next to her name, the card had an address, handwritten: *127, Lavender Street, Singapore Casket, Singapore 338735*. I knocked on the door, there was no reply. I pushed. Ma, I said into the narrow rectangle of darkness that had suddenly opened, Ma, are you there, Ma, may I come in?” (*The City and the Sea* 238, emphasis in the original). The last words of the previous sea chapter are repeated at the end of this city chapter, and the following sea chapter is also

directly connected to it since the woman wonders who the person who has just called her name is:

*Who is this at the door, so polite, so well-behaved, and calling her Ma? In almost a whisper?*

*Is she in the wrong room? Is this a son or daughter, because she cannot make out, from the voice, if the person at the door is a boy or girl, man or woman?*

*Or is it one of those children she saw at the beach, playing in the dark, who's lost his or her way and ended up in this hotel, outside her room?*

[...]

*She sees the door being pushed open, didn't she lock it when she came back from the beach?*

*Of course, she says, come in. She sits up in her bed. (The City and the Sea 241, emphasis in the original)*

The following city chapter is once more directly connected to the ending of this sea chapter: “Ma is here. Ma is sitting up in her bed, my mother so young, my mother so beautiful, so kind and so brave my mother, I am sure she's expecting me because she looks ready to leave, ready to return home” (*The City and the Sea* 245). The woman now starts talking in this city chapter as well, asking her son a lot of questions:

I have been here waiting for you, almost two weeks, Ma says, that's how she starts, her speaking continuous, effortless, as if she doesn't need to pause even to breathe, I have been wondering what's happened to you, are you safe? have you eaten anything? did you do your Christmas homework? is there something I can help you with? I can help, you know, I am your Ma, how has your life been? (*The City and the Sea* 245)

It becomes clear that a lot of time must have passed since the mother adds the following questions: “how did you do in school? did you finish school on time? did you go to a college of your choice, which college did you go to? what did you study? what kind of a job did you get? are you happy with your job? do you learn something every day? did you get married?” (*The City and the Sea* 245). The woman is concerned about her son and wishes to learn about every single detail of his life. The reader might first assume that she is confused and unable to make sense of the situation, which is why she asks her ten-year-old son all of these questions. Her son initially seems to have the same impression, noting that “Ma is speaking non-stop, whispering, shouting, her words roll out, they slide they slip they tumble they fall, she is breathless, she needs no breath, she has no breath” (*The City and the Sea* 246). The reader may be surprised when the woman finally reveals that the boy only exists in her imagination: “You are the one I have been thinking up. I thought you up the day they told me at the hospital that I can never have a child even if I survive, even if I pull through all

this, because of what December and his friends had done to me” (*The City and the Sea* 247). All of a sudden, she is able to remember what has really happened, which is emphasised by the switch to the first person, as in the prologue:

I was busy working and dreaming, my parents at home, once in a while thinking about the future in which I have my own house and my own family, maybe a child, too, strong and beautiful, kind and brave. So, once they told me that I would never have that because of what had happened to me, I had to make you up, take all that was inside me, still good, not hurt, mix them up, put the mixture out under the night sky. [...] December and his friends had come from The Sea and they dragged me in, that’s why I sent you out on that adventure, I made you travel through The Sea, I opened the window at night so that December could come in, I made both of you take that journey and now that’s over, I want you back inside me so that I can, we can, move ahead. Come to me, Ma says, step by slow step, be careful, don’t trip in the dark, I don’t want you to hurt yourself. (*The City and the Sea* 247-48)

The woman has now ended up in the city and in the reality, admitting that the boy of the other whole is only her imaginary construct. Nevertheless, there is another sea chapter that now, surprisingly, presents the boy, indicating that both the place by the sea and the boy are only part of the woman’s imagination. The two have therefore exchanged places at this point, with the woman waking up in the city (even though the hospital is located in Singapore and not in Delhi) and taking in the reality around her, and the boy turning up in the place by the sea, the woman’s imaginary world. The final sea chapter even presents the perspective of the boy: “*I walk towards Ma, step by slow step. Her hospital room is dark, there’s a blue night light above her bed, there is a sheet pulled over her [...]*” (*The City and the Sea* 251, emphasis in the original). The following passage implies that mother and son are reunited after the woman’s death in the hospital in Singapore:

*So I climb into her bed, I walk into her arms and, like the thought that I am, crawl right back into her head so that no one can take me away from her any more. Once I am inside her, Ma says let us go to the sea, to the island I came from. You and I have been reunited, there is no need for me to stay in this room, in this hospital, in this bed.*

*Let.*

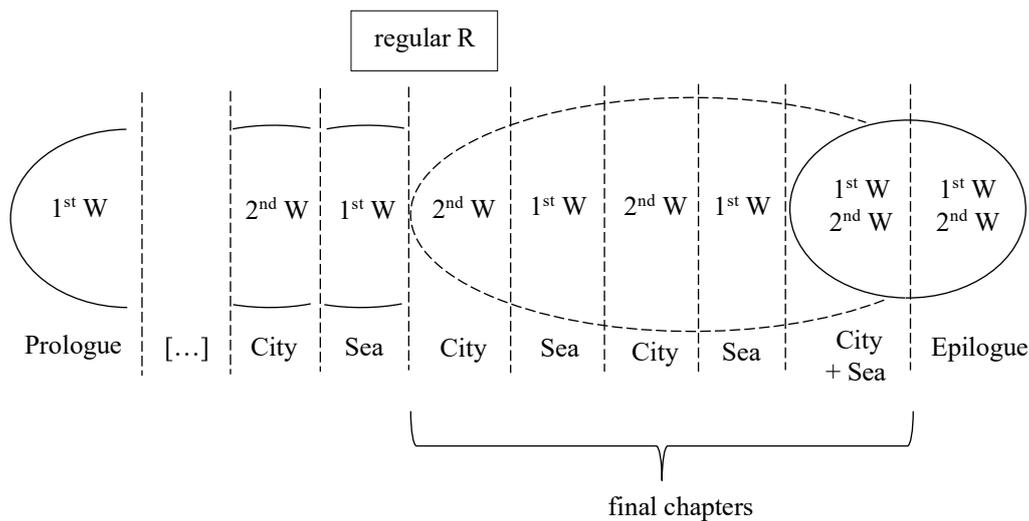
*Us.*

*Go.*

*She says. (The City and the Sea 252, emphasis in the original)*

In the following chapter, *The City and the Sea*, both are united forever. It is once more written from the perspective of the boy, implying that the woman has died but that her hopes, wishes and imaginary constructs have acquired the power to live on forever. The boy notes that “Ma

knows The Globe so well she doesn't need to look at it as she tells [him] the route [they] will take. [They] will sail from this city into the Straits of Malacca, up north-west into the Andaman Sea" (*The City and the Sea* 257). Finally, the two are able explore the whole world and to go wherever they want, fulfilling all of the woman's deepest wishes. During their journey, they will encounter other people who have ended up in The Sea: "In between the Canary Islands, to [their] right, will be the Mediterranean. Soon to get crowded with boat after boat packed with men, women and children, fleeing war and death" (*The City and the Sea* 257). In the epilogue, the woman reappears and notes that she and her son "are now no more with the living, only the dead and the missing can see [them], only they can feel [their] presence" (*The City and the Sea* 263). As the woman speaks in the first person again, it implies that she is now alive again in her imaginary world, after having left the world of the living behind once and for all.



She further notes that she and her son often talk about the things that could have happened in the future if she had not been attacked:

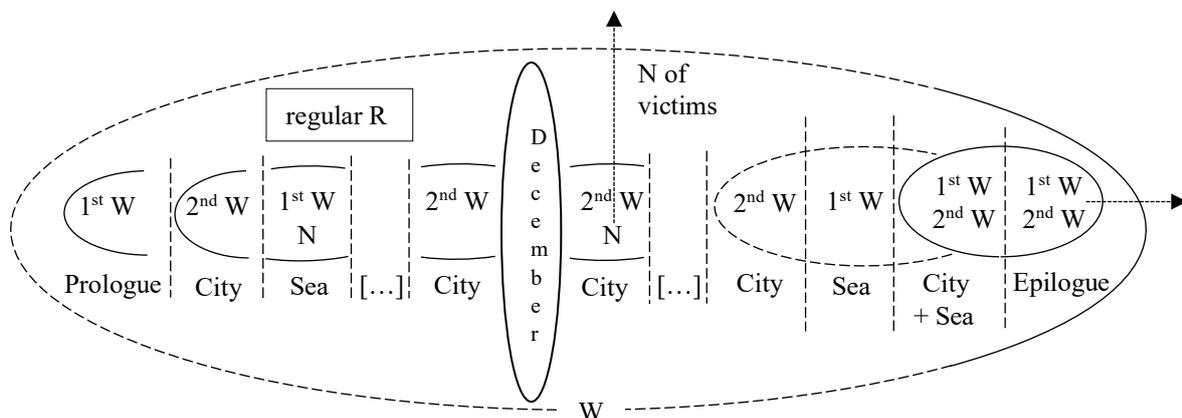
When we aren't silent, watching the sea and the sky, we spend our days, our nights talking about our possibilities. All that I could have done, all that my child could have done, all that we could have done, how we could have lived full lives, touched the world and changed it forever. Once in a while, we think of December and his family. Perhaps, one day we shall visit him, when my child and I can sail, safe and uninterrupted, right into the broken rectangle that is his house. If it's still there, that is. If The Sea hasn't pulled December and his family down to its depths, you never know what can happen in the city. (*The City and the Sea* 261-62)

The woman additionally informs the reader about the refugee boats they regularly encounter during their journey; one of the refugees points at her, telling another passenger to look at her:

Look at her, he says, pointing to me.  
 She, in the black jacket.  
 In the cream-coloured shirt.  
 In black leggings and a red scarf.  
 Her face smashed in. Her eyes missing.  
 Her insides emptied out.  
 Her chin broken.  
 Like us, she is hurt, the young man shouts to his passengers and his crew.

*(The City and the Sea 265)*

Even though the dead cannot be saved anymore, the implication is that there might be hope for the future if things start changing right now, not only in India but also in the rest of the world. The refugees start following the woman and her son in their boat, hoping that she will lead them to a safe place where they will feel whole again and be able to forget the horrors they have had to endure. As Madhavan notes in this context, the “[c]haracters [are] at odds with reality. They conjure up images of long voyages for themselves, to unknown meridians. Through these peregrinations of the mind, Jha is, perhaps, trying to tell the reader that reality is horrible. So horrible that he seldom mentions it” (n.p.). Throughout the entire narrative, the woman tries to blank out her reality in order to stand her situation, escaping into an imaginary world and weaving a story that could have happened. The two separate wholes initially place emphasis on this opposition between reality and imagination, although the lines between the two become increasingly blurry as the narrative progresses and are finally indistinguishable. Even though the sense of wholeness that is created when the two separate wholes finally merge can only be brought about by death and a blanking out of reality, it also generates hope for less fragmentation in the future, not only in India but anywhere in the world.



## 6.2 “Becoming Everything”: Arundhati Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

Born in Shillong in 1961 and raised in Kerala, Arundhati Roy is by now an internationally acclaimed author and activist. Since winning the Man Booker Prize for her debut novel, *The God of Small Things*, in 1997, she has mainly focused on political activism and published several works of non-fiction, many of which are frequently criticised for being polemical in nature. As Swati Ganguly points out, “Arundhati Roy reinvented herself in the avatar of an activist-writer, focusing attention on contemporary political events across the globe. In the last twenty years, Roy has emerged as a major dissenting, radical voice from India who has made scathing indictments of the State and Corporate nexus that has sustained itself by exploiting the country’s human and natural resources and by brutally squashing people’s resistances” (133). Twenty years after her Booker Prize triumph and international breakthrough, Roy returned to fiction in 2017, publishing the novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, which, just like her numerous works of non-fiction, addresses a wide range of political and social issues in contemporary Indian society.

### ***The Ministry of Utmost Happiness: An Overview of Content and Form***

Roy’s second novel presents the stories of a wide range of characters affected by social injustices, raising awareness of the various forces that keep fragmenting Indian society. The first narrative strand of the novel focuses on Anjum, a traumatised hijra character who starts living in a graveyard in Delhi after leaving behind the Khwabgah and the hijra community she had been part of for several years. After some time, she manages to recover her strength and starts building a new home in the desolate place, which gradually also turns into a refuge for other social outcasts. When she and some of her new acquaintances take a trip to the city one day, they encounter various groups of protesters and homeless people near Jantar Mantar, with the narrator making the reader aware of the impact of the caste system and globalisation on Indian society. Suddenly, an abandoned baby appears on the pavement and Anjum is eager to take it with her, but Tilottama, a friend of one of the protesters, is faster than her. Tilo is the protagonist of the novel’s second narrative strand, which focuses on the conflict in Kashmir and explores Tilo’s relationship to one of the freedom fighters, Musa. Tilo, whose social background remains obscure throughout the whole narrative, has no sense of belonging and is finally granted shelter in Anjum’s graveyard as well, where she finds a home for the first time in her life. These main narrative strands are intertwined with the

stories of many more minor characters who are also victims of social injustice or of the conflict in Kashmir, creating a rich overview of contemporary Indian society and the forces that keep fragmenting it.

The novel addresses a wide range of social and political issues, ranging from the exclusion of hijras and untouchables to the Kashmir conflict and the ambivalent impact of globalisation. As Angelo Monaco points out, “[t]he narrative thus thematises the contradictions of a postcolonial nation, specifically the matter of the *hijra* communities (male-to-female transgenders), the rise of Hindu nationalism, the struggle for Kashmiri independence, the plight of caste discrimination, the impact of rapid industrialisation on the environment and the effects of globalisation on society” (58, emphasis in the original). In fact, as Kishore Ram adds,

Roy brings into the texture of the novel almost all issues that happened in India from the emergency to the prohibition of cattle slaughter – Bhopal Gas tragedy, the Maoist movement, the Narmada Bacho Andolan, the Gujarat riots, the issue of Kashmir, the anti-corruption drives initiated by Anna Hazare, the founding of Aam Aadmi and all other political developments that occurred in the world’s largest democracy connecting the twenty years she took to write her second novel. (96)

Ram further notes that “[t]he asymmetrical and complicated structure of the novel reflects the traumatic condition of present day India. Roy experiments with the use of language to convey her strong sense of disorder, dissonance and illogicality which govern individual and social life” (95). Like the novels analysed in chapter 3, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* places particular emphasis on the plurality of the Indian social set-up and the conflicts that may arise between the various social, religious and ethnic groups that exist next to each other. However, in contrast to the novels of chapter 3, most parts of Roy’s work are told by an omniscient narrator, thus displaying a higher degree of mediation and a clear narrative hierarchy. Nevertheless, the narrative is also characterised by numerous clashes of forms that interrupt the main plotline, which initially appears to be fairly linear. However, it soon turns out that “*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* cannot be easily summarized into a linear plot. It is set partly in Delhi, partly in Kashmir; it ranges temporally from the 1990s to the present day, and weaves together the stories of geographically distant characters” (Menozzi 23). Monaco adds that, “[i]n its twelve chapters, which intersperse chronological linearity with flashbacks, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* combines an omniscient narrative voice and multiple subjective perspectives that take turns to contribute to a kaleidoscopic storytelling” (57). When the narrative moves to the city of Delhi and subsequently focuses on Tilo and the Kashmir conflict, more and more clashes of forms are observable as particularly this

second narrative strand of the novel is not presented in chronological order and employs several switches between heterodiegetic and homodiegetic narrators. Additionally, it includes a wide range of multimodal elements, particularly letters, notebook entries and written testimonies, which keep interrupting the narrative and clash with each other. As Monaco also observes, “[t]he omniscient narrative viewpoint is often replaced by a shifting focalization on other characters that recount their stories without inhibition, while, at times, letters, diaries, text-messages and poems are employed to make the events more genuine and authentic” (57-58). The employment of these multimodal features supports the omniscient narrator’s intentions to lay bare the forces that lead to a fragmentation of Indian society in various respects and hence also cause the characters’ inner fragmentation. The clashes of forms further point to the fact that Indian society is so plural that it is impossible to convey an impression of unity, instead placing emphasis on the tensions that exist between different social groups and examining the position of the individual in the social hierarchy. As Ram adds in this context, “[t]o present a world that is undergoing disintegration Roy employs a narrative style that is broken, repetitive and fraught with ironic potentialities” (95). Menozzi further notes that “*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* reframes realism by critiquing the idea that reality is linear, coherent, and easily captured by documentary representation” (22). Fragmentation is omnipresent in Roy’s novel, with multimodal features and switches of narrators and perspectives reflecting upon Indian society’s complex structures, social realities and the characters’ inner fragmentation as they are affected by traumatic events and social exclusion. Nalini Iyer therefore argues that,

[i]n *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy radically questions the form of the novel derived from Western forms and adapted and developed by Indian writers. She signals through her hybrid and sprawling form that fragmenting nations need narrative forms that offer diverse voices a place of expression. For her, the Indian English novel of the new millennium needs a moral compass and a relentless pursuit of justice, and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is her exploration of both justice and genre. (171-72)

Structurally speaking, the various forms that clash with each other throughout the novel, reflecting upon Indian society’s outer fragmentation and the characters’ inner fragmentation, are held together by an omniscient narrator who is in charge of the narrative and the arrangement of its various forms. This narrator arranges the novel’s forms into a horizontal network that does not follow any specific pattern or rhythm, thus conveying a sense of chaos and the impression that it must be possible to provide an overview of everything that is happening in contemporary Indian society. The fact that the various nodes of the network have the potential to open up even more networks that operate on a smaller scale and may

expand in various directions enhances the sense of chaos that is already created by the large-scale network. Despite this structural fragmentation, the omniscient narrator surprisingly suggests at the end of the novel that it is possible to achieve wholeness and closure in the realm of fiction, therefore once more emphasising the narrative hierarchy the narrator has established.

### **Anjum’s Plotline and the Establishment of a Narrative Hierarchy**

The novel starts with a fairly linear narrative, occasionally interrupted by flashbacks and flashforwards, focusing on Anjum’s childhood and her experiences in the hijra community. Even though the omniscient narrator is in control of Anjum’s narrative, thus establishing a clear hierarchy in terms of narrative technique, the narrator remains rather unobtrusive. The prologue and the first short chapter of the novel already provide a glimpse into Anjum’s desperate situation shortly after she has moved to the graveyard: “She lived in the graveyard like a tree. At dawn she saw the crows off and welcomed the bats home. At dusk she did the opposite. [...] When she first moved in, she endured months of casual cruelty like a tree would – without flinching” (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 3). In the next chapter, the omniscient narrator begins to tell Anjum’s life story in a fairly linear narrative, starting with her mother’s exploration of her body the day after giving birth: “The next morning, when the sun was up and the room nice and warm, she unswaddled little Aftab [later Anjum]. She explored his tiny body – eyes nose head neck armpits fingers toes – with sated, unhurried delight. That was when she discovered, nestling underneath his boy-parts, a small, unformed, but undoubtedly girl-part” (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 7). The following pages describe the most important stages of Anjum’s childhood (cf. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 8-24), her decision to live as a woman, and her move to the Khwabgah:

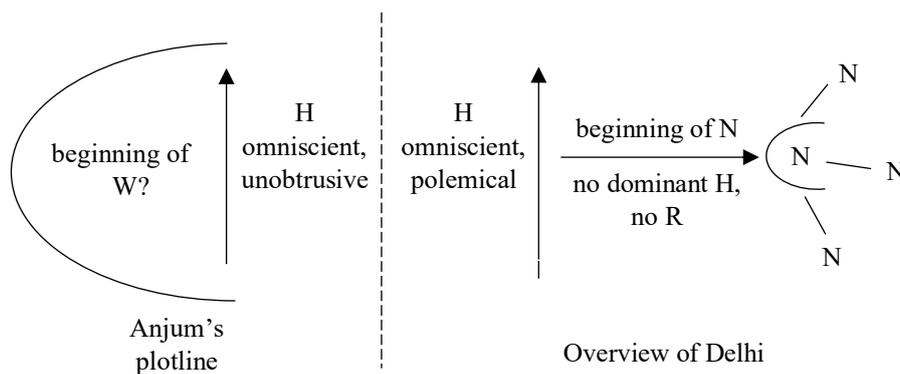
And so, at the age of fifteen, only a few hundred yards from where his family had lived for centuries, Aftab stepped through an ordinary doorway into another universe. [...] The next night at a small ceremony he was presented with a green Khwabgah dupatta and initiated into the rules and rituals that formally made him a member of the Hijra community. Aftab became Anjum, disciple of Ustad Kulsum Bi of the Delhi Gharana, one of the seven regional Hijra Gharanas in the country, each headed by a Nayak, a Chief, all of them headed by a Supreme Chief. (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 25)

The narrator continues telling Anjum’s story in a fairly linear fashion until she decides to move to the graveyard after a traumatic journey to Gujarat, and Kulsum Bi’s objection against her subsequent decision to force her foster child, Zainab, to disguise as a boy for

safety reasons. Traumatized and heartbroken, Anjum decides to leave the Khwabgah behind and flees to the old graveyard, where she meets Saddam, an untouchable who is eager to avenge his father's death. The two finally manage to build up a new home in the desolate place, even though, initially, "Anjum waited to die. Saddam waited to kill" (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 92).

### An Overview of Delhi: Starting the Network

The following third chapter moves away from the graveyard, providing an overview of the city of Delhi, on which globalisation has left its mark. This chapter must be understood as a new large-scale form as it moves away from Anjum, breaking the fairly linear narrative established up to this point and focusing on a wide range of characters who are affected by social injustices or protest against them. As Kanchana Lanzet notes, "Arundhati has taken on this mammoth task of presenting to her readers, this complex nation with all its conflicts, as an advocate for the marginalised and the outcasts of the society, ecological degradation, the tribals or the Adivasis, human rights violation and for peace in Kashmir, skilfully narrated using dualities and symbolism" (118). At the beginning of the chapter, the narrator makes their authority clear, before introducing the first few elements of a network that will subsequently expand throughout the novel.



The narrator first makes their presence and political attitudes felt, openly criticising the injustices fuelled by globalisation and the caste system (in contrast to being rather unobtrusive and covert during the first two chapters focusing on Anjum's personal development). As Menozzi notes,

[i]n Roy's novel, fictional plot, characters and narrative time are constantly broken by long authorial interventions; realism does not equal an aesthetic of transparency but, rather, an unrelenting interrogation of the paradox of the novel's truth claims. Its 'realist'

dimension can be grasped as a constant shift between truth-claims and self-reflexivity, a negotiation between the referentiality proper to non-fictional writing and the fictionality proper to novelistic representation. (22)

For instance, the narrator ironically notes that “[s]kyscrapers and steel factories sprang up where forests used to be, rivers were bottled and sold in supermarkets, fish were tinned, mountains mined and turned into shining missiles. Massive dams lit up the cities like Christmas trees. Everyone was happy” (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 98). As Iyer points out, Roy’s novel “[...] straddles the boundaries between fiction and polemical prose” (166), which is particularly noticeable in this chapter of the novel. The narrator keeps expressing their anger in a polemical fashion, noting that

[f]iercely competitive TV channels covered the story of the breaking city as ‘Breaking News’. Nobody pointed out the irony. They unleashed their untrained, but excellent-looking, young reporters, who spread across the city like a rash, asking urgent, empty questions; they asked the poor what it was like to be poor, the hungry what it was like to be hungry, the homeless what it was like to be homeless. [...] The TV channels never ran out of sponsorship for their live telecasts of despair. They never ran out of despair. Experts aired their expert opinions for a fee: *Somebody* has to pay the price for Progress, they said expertly. (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 99, emphasis in the original)

Shortly afterwards, the narrator focuses on the plight of a few characters in particular, including Gulabiya Vechania and Dr Azad Bhartiya. The former is a cleaner of a public toilet who loses his job when he gets drunk one night and the Honda advertisement on the outside wall of the toilet is damaged by revolutionaries who spray their slogans all over it (cf. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 113). The latter, Dr Azad Bhartiya, is given a voice in the following short chapter, which must be understood as one of the first constitutive elements of the network the narrator generates. The narrator first tells the reader that “Dr Bhartiya was so thin as to be almost two-dimensional. [...] He sat behind an old cardboard sign covered with a dim, scratched, plastic sheet” (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 125). The new form and element of the network is introduced when the following page reveals what is written on this cardboard sign; in addition to his name, address and qualifications, the cardboard sign states Bhartiya’s intentions: “I am fasting against the following issues: I am against the Capitalist Empire, plus against US Capitalism, Indian and American State Terrorism/ All Kinds of Nuclear Weapons and Crime, plus against the Bad Education System/ Corruption/ Violence/ Environmental Degradation and All Other Evils” (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 126). This new form supports the omniscient narrator’s attitudes as it contributes to an authentic depiction of the situation in Delhi and serves as a truth claim. After the

narrator's critique of globalisation and the injustices created by the caste system as well as the attempt to provide an overview of the various groups that are affected by these forces, the narrator now zooms in on one individual, Azad Bhartiya, who is protesting against these issues in a first-person narrative. The fact that the overt narrator disappears at this point and presents the views of one individual in particular further draws attention to the circumstance that the collective is made up of individual voices, which may not even be fully grasped by an omniscient narrator. The narrator only intervenes to inform the reader that "[t]he yellow plastic *Jaycees Sari Palace* shopping bag that sat next to him [Bhartiya] upright, like a small yellow person, contained papers, typed as well as handwritten, in English and Hindi. Several copies of a document – a newsletter or a transcript of some sort – were laid out on the pavement, weighed down by stones" (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 127). Afterwards, the narrator disappears once more, inserting the full text of Bhartiya's newsletter into the novel and thus extending the network:

'MY NEWS & VIEWS.' (UPDATE)

My original name as given to me by my parents is Inder Y. Kumar. Dr Azad Bhartiya is the name I have given myself. It was registered in court on October 13<sup>th</sup> 1997 along with the English translation i.e.: Free/Liberated Indian. My affidavit is attached. It is not the original; it is a copy attested by a Patiala House magistrate. If you accept this name for me, then you have the right to think that this is no place for an Azad Bhartiya to be found, here in this public prison on the public footpath – see, it even has bars. You may think a real Azad Bhartiya should be a modern person living in a modern house with a car and a computer, or maybe in that tall building there, that five-star hotel. That one is called Hotel Meridian. If you look up at the twelfth floor you will be able to see the AC room with attached breakfast and bathroom where the US President's five dogs stayed when he came to India. [...] (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 127)

Bhartiya continues to describe the issues he is fasting against and provides a lot of details, such as the date when he changed his name in court, which makes the newsletter and hence also the narrator's standpoint appear more believable. As Ram adds in this respect, "[t]he way the narrative voice shifts from third person to the first and then again to the third person, the juxtaposing of pamphlets, newspaper cuttings, letters and other documents give the impression that the novel is concerned with real, and not fictitious, events and the author's interpretative comments on them" (96). The form of the newsletter and the switch from third to first person therefore support the narrator's intentions of criticising social hierarchies and the political system designed to maintain these hierarchies. The interaction of these two forms, the overview of Delhi provided by the omniscient narrator, and the newsletter written by Bhartiya, which must be understood as elements of a horizontal network that is initiated

by the omniscient narrator, additionally raises awareness of the circumstance that it is never possible to see everything that is going on in a society, particularly if it is as diverse and fragmented as the Indian one; nevertheless, the narrator attempts to provide an insight into (almost) all of the social issues that are worth addressing by employing a horizontal network whose elements are therefore only loosely connected.

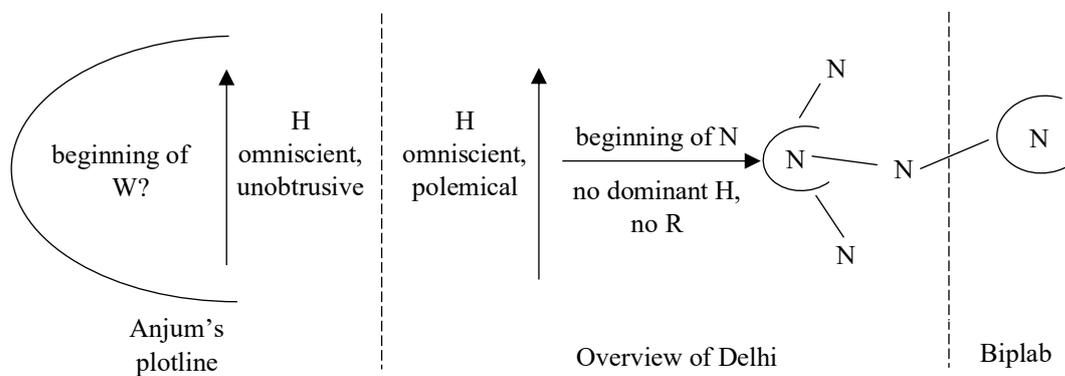
Afterwards, the narrator focuses on a baby that suddenly appears on the pavement and that Anjum, who has arrived in the city with some of her new acquaintances, wants to take with her. However, Tilo, a friend of Bhartiya's and the protagonist of the second plotline, which unfolds after this incident, picks up the baby first and disappears in the crowd (cf. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 124). After the following chapter, which focuses on how Saddam and Anjum try to find the baby, the narrator appears in a chapter with the title *Some Questions for Later*, which is only a few sentences long. The narrator once more makes their omniscience clear, asking the following questions to awaken the reader's curiosity:

When the Baby Seal grew older, when she was (say) crowded around an ice-cream cart on a burning afternoon, one among a press of schoolgirls clamouring for an orange bar, might she get a sudden whiff of the heady scent of ripe Mahua that had infused the forest the day she was born? Would her body remember the feel of dry leaves on the forest floor, or the hot-metal touch of the barrel of her mother's gun that had been held to her forehead with the safety catch off? Or had her past been erased for ever? (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 139)

Even though this chapter is also told by the omniscient narrator of the previous few chapters and therefore not necessarily a new form in terms of narrative technique, it stands out as the narrator openly demonstrates their omniscience and alludes to the potential ability to create closure at the end of the novel. Readers might be confused by the questions the narrator poses as they have not learned anything specific about the baby yet and may wonder why the mother had apparently held a gun to the baby's forehead. It only turns out at the end of the novel that the baby's mother had been a persecuted Telugu woman who had to give birth to the baby in the forest and intended to kill it, before changing her mind and abandoning it in the city (cf. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 417-26). At this point, however, the reader knows nothing about the child's background and the narrator deliberately raises these questions to arouse the reader's curiosity. The narrator therefore further demonstrates their power as they are supposedly the only one who might inform readers about the baby's origin and thus eventually provide them with the information they are longing for.

**Biplab: A First-Person Narrator within the Network**

After this short interlude of half a page, the omniscient narrator disappears completely for a whole chapter. The new form that is now introduced presents a first-person narrator, namely Biplab, Tilo’s landlord and secret admirer, and must be understood as another large element of the network started during the overview of Delhi. Instead of looking into the mind of Biplab and reporting his attitudes in a heterodiegetic narrative with internal focalisation, the narrator decides to disappear completely, granting Biplab the space to express his thoughts directly to the reader and therefore extending the horizontal but heterogeneous network, which presents characters from different social backgrounds and employs a wide range of perspectives and multimodal features.



When the new and unknown first-person narrator is introduced, the reader has to manage without the omniscient narrator’s guidance and is forced to rely on Biplab’s limited perspective. As Jobin M. Kanjirakkat observes in this context, “[p]art of the story gets to be told from the perspective of a bureaucrat who reeks of elitism, obedience to traditional and modern hierarchical structures and banality (in the sense of Arendt’s *Banality of Evil*)” (1). Jagdish Batra adds that “[t]he [...] strategy adopted by Roy is to put her words into the mouth of an armyman to show it all coming from the horse’s mouth” (434). The employment of this first-person narrator is therefore also a way for the omniscient narrator, whose attitudes resemble those of the empirical author, to distance themselves from the views they do not necessarily share. As Monaco also notes, “[t]hrough the ironic voice of an Indian governmental official, Roy denounces the wicked abuses of human rights in the valley, a stance that she has taken in several essays” (66). Monaco explains his view in more detail, arguing that,

[i]n “Azadi: The Only Thing Kashmiris Want”, for instance, Roy attacks the Indian state that she holds responsible for having contributed to ‘subvert, suppress,

represent, misrepresent, discredit, interpret, intimidate, purchase, and simply snuff out the voice of the Kashmiri people’ (Roy 2011, 58). Though ironic, Bipbal’s [sic] words thus illustrate the vehemence of Roy’s support to Kashmir independence and they reverberate with the traumatic images that the novel records: ‘[d]eath was everywhere. Death was everything. Career. Desire. Dream. Poetry. Love. Youth itself. Dying became just another way of living’ (Roy 2017, 314). (66-67)

However, as Sameer Rahim further points out in his review, “Garson [Biplab] is no caricature: he understands the wrongness of what is happening in Kashmir; he just cannot face up to his own complicity. And he is infatuated with Tilo, a woman with some similarities to Roy, whom he politically opposes but cannot help looking out for” (n.p.).

It also becomes clear that Biplab is presumably mentally unstable as he cannot cope with the loss of Tilo and the loneliness he therefore feels:

Though I don’t feel unwell, when I look at myself in the mirror I can see that my skin is dull and my hair has thinned noticeably. [...] The drinking, I admit, is worrying. I have tested the patience of both my wife and my boss in unacceptable ways and am determined to redeem myself. I am booked into a rehabilitation centre where I will be for six weeks with no phone, no internet and no contact whatsoever with the world. I was supposed to check in today, but I’ll do it on Monday. I long to return to Kabul, the city where I will probably die, in some hackneyed, unheroic manner, perhaps while handing my Ambassador a file. BOOM. No more me. (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 144)

After Anjum’s story and the overview of Delhi, the new form featuring Biplab as a first-person narrator zooms in on the thoughts of a specific individual who works for the Indian Intelligence Bureau, not supporting Kashmiri independence. He reveals that, “[n]ow, twenty-five years down the line [...] to [their] advantage, [they] have eight or nine versions of the ‘True’ Islam battling it out in Kashmir. [...] The only thing that keeps Kashmir from self-destructing like Pakistan and Afghanistan is good old petit bourgeois capitalism” (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 170). In contrast to Azad Bhartiya, for instance, whose first-person report seems to offer a sophisticated evaluation of the political issues the omniscient narrator had already criticised beforehand, Biplab is portrayed as a mentally unstable character, who is additionally an alcoholic. Even though the characters that turn up in the novel are part of a social hierarchy, the novel’s network structure conveys the impression that the voices of characters from the bottom of the hierarchy are equally important. However, since the narrator, who is close to the empirical author, is in control of most of the elements of this network, it is possible for them to present the opinions they do not agree with in a slightly condescending manner or to disappear completely. Biplab also provides an

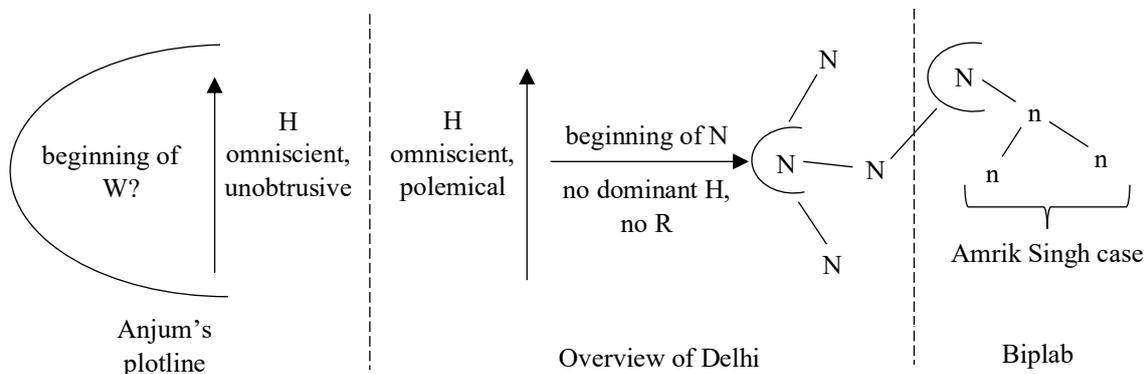
overview of his personal situation, making it clear that he is longing for the tenant of one of his flats as he secretly loves her:

My second-floor tenant seems to have left. ‘Left’, if Rolyoly is to be believed, may be something of a euphemism. But then ‘tenant’ is a euphemism too. No, we were not lovers. At no point did she ever offer me a hint that she might be open to a relationship of that sort. Had she, I don’t know myself well enough to say how things might have turned out. Because all my life, ever since I first met her all those years ago when we were still in college, I have constructed myself around her. Not around *her* perhaps, but around the memory of my love for her. She doesn’t know that. Nobody does, except perhaps Naga, Musa and me, the men who loved her. (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 149, emphasis in the original)

As Biplab is drawn into memories of his youth (cf. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 149-60), it gradually becomes clear that the tenant and person he has secretly loved for so many years is Tilo. He is therefore also presented as a weak character in this respect as he admits that he has hopelessly fallen for Tilo and will never be able to forget her, which makes it easier to convey the impression that his statements may be less reliable and trustworthy.

#### The Amrik Singh Case: A Small-Scale Network within the Network

When Biplab takes a closer look at Tilo’s vacated room and finds photos, notebooks and documents of various sorts, for instance testimonies by Loveleen and her husband, Amrik Singh, a cruel military officer responsible for the killings of numerous Kashmiri militants, another small-scale form is introduced, demonstrating that there are many more stories that could potentially be explored in more detail and endlessly expand the network. As in the case of Bhartiya’s newsletter, the texts of the testimonies are inserted into the novel and must be understood as separate forms that interrupt Biplab’s narrative for a short period of time and even generate a separate network that operates on a smaller scale.



After a short introduction that reveals the background story of Amrik Singh and his wife, Loveleen’s narrative, “based on a paraphrase of Loveleen’s interview” (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 199, emphasis in the original), is provided:

My husband Amrik Singh was a military major posted in Srinagar, Kashmir. [...] In 1995 a human rights lawyer by the name of Jalib Qadri was kidnapped and killed and my husband was blamed by the local police and we felt that Muslims were framing him. My husband did not accept bribes and he did not like Muslim terrorists. He was an honorable man. [...] We left Kashmir after three years and lived in Jammu. In 2003 we left our country for Canada. We applied for asylum and they denied us. It was heartless. We needed help. We showed them all our evidences, still they denied us. In October 2005 we came to Seattle. My husband got a job as a truck driver and in 2006 we moved to Clovis, California. We have no protection. We don’t go anywhere, we have no outings or happy life. If we go out we don’t know if we will come home alive. All the time we feel we are watched by the terrorists. (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 199-201)

When this form interrupts Biplab’s first-person narration, another element is added to the network, which reflects the huge number of conflicts that keep fragmenting Indian society. It also draws attention to the fact that Biplab’s perspective is limited and that he therefore cannot know everything about the Amrik Singh case. Amrik and his wife hope to be granted asylum in the US, claiming to be innocent victims when in fact Singh is a ruthless murderer who had ordered the killing of human rights activist Jalib Qadri and tortured several Kashmiri militants and their relatives, including Musa and Tilo. As Swati Ganguly also notes in the context of Kashmir,

[i]n Kashmir, as the narrative reveals, every person has at least two stories to tell, each contradicting the other and yet one can never be certain as to how to read them. A perfect instance of this is the gradual, layered unfolding of the tale of Amrik Singh, a major in the Indian Army posted in Srinagar in 1995 who relocates to California following the hue and cry over his gross violation of Human Rights. The officers of the Indian Intelligence Bureau fail to ascertain the cause behind the suicide of Amrik Singh, an event which remains shrouded in mystery as the various documents – official and personal accounts – jostle with each other as claimants of the reality of what happened. (136)

After reading Loveleen’s story, Biplab also looks at the psychologist’s assessment of the case: “Based on the data presented above there is no doubt in my mind that Mrs Loveleen Sing and Mr Amrik Singh both suffer from severe Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. [...] Given these facts I highly recommend that Mr and Mrs Amrik Singh and their family be given protection and asylum here in the United States of America so that they can begin to lead a normal life to the extent that it is possible for them” (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 203-204). Biplab concludes that “[s]o they had nearly pulled it off, Mr and Mrs Singh. They

were on the verge of becoming legal citizens of the United States. And yet, a couple of months later Amrik Singh chose to shoot himself and his whole family. What sense did that make? Could it have been something other than suicide?" (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 204). The documents that are inserted into the novel only provide snippets of information, indicating that many more details and perspectives would be needed to fully make sense of the case. As Rahim adds in this context, "*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is packed with documents, diaries, reports, storytellings and re-tellings that at first seem to offer truth, but require adjustment in the light of new information" (n.p.). This interaction of forms therefore demonstrates, on a small scale, that it is only possible to provide snippets of 'everything.'

### **Tilo's Plotline and Even More Networks within the Network**

After the network's element that features Biplab as a first-person narrator, the omniscient narrator returns and focuses on Tilo and the baby, now named Miss Jebeen, that she had picked up from the pavement in Delhi. Tilo's narrative, or (incomplete) whole, is also part of the horizontal network that keeps expanding throughout the novel, even though she does not function as a first-person narrator. The story that now follows takes place before Biplab enters Tilo's flat and rummages through the secret documents she still stores there. As the narrator tells the reader, "[t]he room showed signs of celebration. The balloons tied to the window grille bumped into each other desultorily, softened and shrivelled by the heat. [...] On the cake it said *Happy Birthday Miss Jebeen*" (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 213). Even though the omniscient narrator takes over again, the following story is not told in chronological order and includes several passages of internal focalisation through Tilo and her ex-husband, Naga, thus contributing to the impression that Tilo's whole is split up into several pieces that keep expanding the novel's large network. After the introduction to the room and the baby, who still lives with Tilo, the following paragraph informs the reader that "Naga asked Tilo for one good reason why she was leaving him. Did he not love her? Had he not been caring? Considerate? Generous? Understanding? Why now? After all these years?" (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 215). Tilo is then drawn into a memory of the past in which Naga tries to figure out why she is leaving him after fourteen years of marriage. The true reason is that Tilo had always been in love with Musa, a radical Kashmiri freedom fighter, and presumably only got married to Naga for safety reasons. As Iyer notes with regard to the second narrative strand about the Kashmir conflict, "[h]ad the Kashmir narrative been the sole focus of this novel, it would emerge as a romantic narrative of an

unconventional woman and her three lovers who symbolize the different parties involved in shaping the Kashmir story – the Indian army, the journalist, and a freedom fighter. However, the Kashmir question is framed as one of the many failures of the Indian state” (168). The narrative continues in a non-linear fashion, describing (from Naga’s perspective) the development of the relationship between Tilo and Naga as well as the situation between Tilo and her mother. At one point, Naga discovers one of Tilo’s notebooks, realising “how little he knew about the woman he had married. And how little he would ever know” (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 245). He discovers the notebook on a pile of hospital files belonging to Tilo’s mother. The form that now interrupts the narrative reflects Tilo’s inner fragmentation more adequately than a report by the omniscient narrator would. The difficult relationship between Tilo and her mother, who “had first abandoned her and then adopted her” (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 155), is alluded to several times during the narrative. When her mother falls ill, Tilo spends a lot of time with her in hospital, but the true nature of the relationship between the two women remains unclear, not only to the reader but probably also to Tilo herself, which is why “Naga was puzzled when, having kept away from her mother for so many years, Tilo so readily agreed to go to Cochin and look after her in hospital” (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 240). Passages of the notebook are then inserted into the narrative and read by Naga. This new form must be understood as a way of zooming in on Tilo and her true feelings, which she does not share with anybody, not even with her husband, as he realises himself. The notebook is fragmented and made up of several snippets of thought that do not seem to be connected at all:

9/7/2009

Take care of the potted plants they may fall.

And that fold – the crumple in the blanket – I might have to trump them all.

[...]

Have you heard the dogs at night? They come to take away the legs from the diabetes people that are cut off and thrown away. I can hear them howling and they run off with people’s arms and legs. Nobody tells them not to.

[...]

They have measured my tears and they are OK in terms of salt and water. I have dry eyes and must keep bathing them and eating sardines to make tears. Sardines are full of tears.

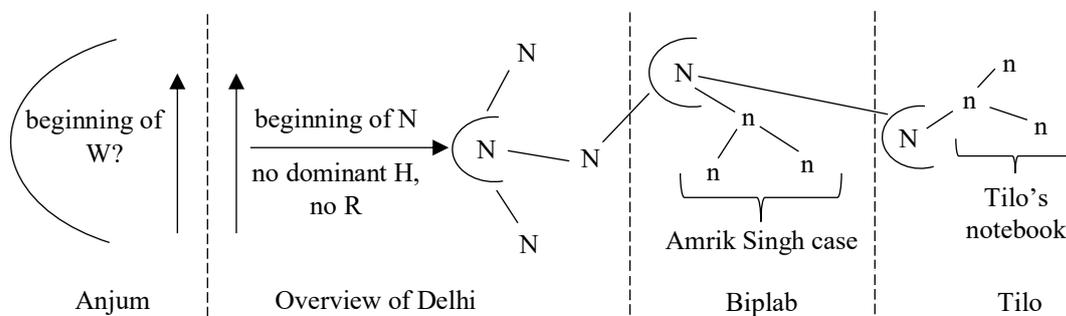
[...]

Hello Doctor this is my daughter who is homeschooled. She’s pretty nasty. She was awful today at the races. But I was pretty awful too. We gave everybody a kicking.

I spent my life doing ridiculous things. I produced a baby. Her.

(*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 245-50)

Tilo tries to reflect on her relationship with her mother, who is close to death and not able to properly communicate with her. The notes seem to be addressed to her mother, but Tilo also incorporates her mother's perspective as she is trying to imagine how her mother must have felt about her when she was a child and given up for adoption. The narrator adds that "[w]hat Naga found was just a sampling. The compiled notes, if they hadn't gone out with the hospital waste, would have made up several volumes" (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 251). But even if Naga had managed to get hold of all of the notes, he would not have been able to make sense of them and to fully understand Tilo's true feelings as they only provide a short glimpse into his wife's mind. The minor forms that are inserted into the narrative therefore split up several of the elements of the novel's network even further, demonstrating that it might not be possible to understand everything about the interior life of other people, let alone everything that is happening in Indian society in terms of political, social and religious tensions. It does therefore not seem to be adequate to convey the illusion of a unified whole as it is impossible to reduce the complexity of the various layers of inner and outer fragmentation to one linear narrative.



Conventional storytelling techniques thus turn out to be an ineffective tool to reflect upon the construction of (Indian) social realities and their impact on individuals. As Menozzi points out in this respect, "[...] realism does not necessarily involve harmony and coherence: to depict a conflictual and chaotic reality of contradiction, the realist writer needs to avoid a reconciling style and stage instead, in literary form itself, social oppression in its full violence" (27-28). Kanjirakkat therefore argues that "[...] this novel is likely to [be] remembered more for its celebration of the country's diversity than as an exceptional work of art" (2). This comment alludes to possible tensions between a conventional understanding of the form of the

novel and necessary deviations from it to reflect upon the construction of the various layers of fragmentation in Indian society.

While the notes Naga discovers are a way of zooming in on Tilo’s feelings, one of the other notebooks that Tilo reads herself and that is ironically called *The Reader’s Digest Book of English Grammar and Comprehension for Very Young Children* is a way of zooming out as it contains “stories, press clippings and some diary entries” (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 271). It is just as fragmented as the notebook Naga discovers, but, instead of providing a deeper insight into Tilo’s feelings, it is an attempt to explore what is happening in Kashmir in terms of outer fragmentation. This small-scale network that is embedded into Tilo’s incomplete whole, which is, in turn, part of the novel’s large network, reflects her attempt to make sense of the conflict, and she is probably not the only one who is unable to fully grasp ‘everything’ that is going on in Kashmir. Most of the entries end with one or more questions about why certain incidents have taken place or what the protagonists’ true intentions are, thus providing an incentive for the reader to reflect on the stories as well. The first entry is about the cruelties committed against Manzoor Ahmed Ganai, a Kashmiri militant, and his father:

#### THE OLD MAN & HIS SON

When Manzoor Ahmed Ganai became a militant, soldiers went to his home and picked up his father, the handsome, always dapper Aziz Ganai. He was kept in the Haider Baig Interrogation Centre. Manzoor Ahmed Ganai worked as a militant for one and a half years. His father remained imprisoned for one and a half years. On the day Manzoor Ahmed Ganai was killed, smiling soldiers opened the door of his father’s cell. ‘*Jenaab*, you wanted *Azadi*? *Mubarak ho aapko*. Congratulations! Today your wish has come true. Your freedom has come.’ The people of the village cried more for the shambling wreck who came running through the orchard in rags with wild eyes and a beard and hair that hadn’t been cut in a year and a half than they did for the boy who had been murdered. The shambling wreck was just in time to be able to lift the shroud and kiss his son’s face before they buried him.

Q 1: Why did the villagers cry more for the shambling wreck?

Q 2: Why did the wreck shamble?

(*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 271, emphasis in the original)

Tilo’s notebook contains stories of real-life figures, thus blurring the lines between fact and fiction. As Menozzi also points out in this context, “[s]tylistically, these notes resemble Arundhati Roy’s non-fictional mode. For instance, each vignette concludes with a mock multiple choice questionnaire, meant not to be answered literally, but to stimulate the reader to consider what the moral message to be gathered from each situation could be, a formal choice that can also be found in Roy’s (2011) essay on Anna Hazare” (30). Alex Tickell

further points out that the stories of the notebook “employ Roy’s established moral leveraging technique of exposing the adult world through a focalising emphasis on child-perceptions” (“Writing in the Necropolis” 7). Additionally, Iyer argues that “Tilo had grappled with how to tell the story of Kashmir and in the satire of the textbook genre, Roy critiques the educational system for covering up history because educational systems are geared to produce adults who subscribe to the nation’s ideology” (170). Tilo also reflects on the senselessness of the war in the penultimate entry of the notebook, in which she herself features as a first-person narrator:

#### NOTHING

I would like to write one of those sophisticated stories in which even though nothing much happens there’s lots to write about. That can’t be done in Kashmir. It’s not sophisticated, what happens here. There’s too much blood for good literature.

Q1: Why is it not sophisticated?

Q2: What is the acceptable amount of blood for good literature?

(*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 283)

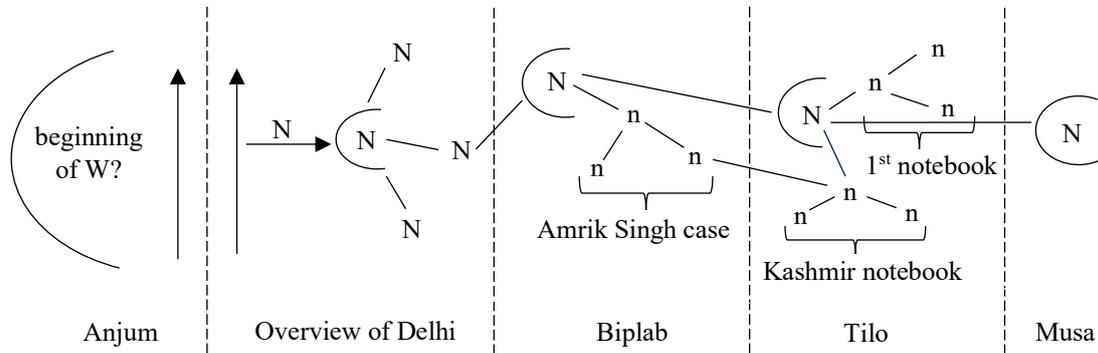
Menozzi notes with reference to this story that “[i]t is telling because it does not concern any specific episode of violence or brutality but, instead, seems to anticipate a critique of the novel itself, and hence might be understood as a sort of meta-comment on the writing of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*” (30). He further points out that

[t]he short fragment poses an important question: is it possible, ethically and epistemologically, to aim to write ‘good literature’ when confronted with the atrocities of the contemporary world? Is literature a good response to ‘blood’ – meaning here the war in Kashmir, but also the suffering experienced by Dalits, Hijra, Adivasi, and other oppressed and exploited peoples in the subcontinent today? The answer that Roy seems to give is a resounding ‘no.’ (Menozzi 31)

The single stories of the notebook can be understood as individual forms as they point to the individual fates of specific people in Kashmir, but they are also arranged into a small-scale network that could be expanded endlessly, indicating that the killings are likely to continue in the future. Additionally, the fact that this network of notebook entries is embedded into Tilo’s incomplete whole, which is, in turn, part of the larger network, enhances the sense of chaos the novel conveys even further as it demonstrates that various forms may overlap and endlessly continue the process of fragmentation.

**Musa in Kashmir: Further Expanding the Network**

The following chapter continues to focus on the Kashmir conflict and Tilo’s lover Musa in particular, thus adding another element to the network and exploring another layer of fragmentation.



At the beginning of the chapter, the omniscient narrator introduces Musa’s daughter, Miss Jebeen, who tragically died during a massacre: “Ever since she was old enough to insist, she had insisted on being called Miss Jebeen. It was the only name she would answer to. Everyone had to call her that, her parents, her grandparents, the neighbours too. She was a precocious devotee of the ‘Miss’ fetish that gripped the Kashmir Valley in the early years of the insurrection” (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 309). On the following pages, the reader learns more about the Kashmir conflict and the massacre that has killed both Musa’s wife and his daughter:

Her massacre was the second in the city in two months. Of the seventeen who died that day, seven were by-standers like Miss Jebeen and her mother (in their case, they were technically by-sitters). They had been watching from their balcony, Miss Jebeen, running a slight temperature, sitting on her mother’s lap, as thousands of mourners carried the body of Usman Abdulla, a popular university lecturer, through the streets of the city. He had been shot by what the authorities declared to be a ‘UG’ – an unidentified gunman – even though his identity was an open secret. (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 320)

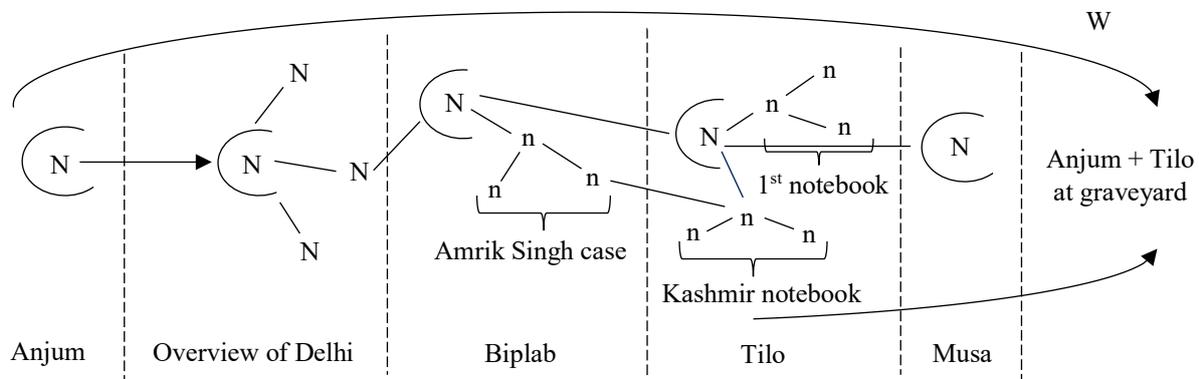
The omniscient narrator also reveals shortly afterwards that there was an explosion during the funeral procession, “[n]ot a very loud one, but loud enough and close enough to generate blind panic” (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 323). Then, “[t]he soldiers came out of the bunker, took position and fired their light machine guns straight into the unarmed crowd that was wedged into the narrow street. [...] Some frightened soldiers turned their weapons on those watching from windows and balconies, and emptied their magazines into people and

railings, walls and windowpanes. Into Miss Jebeen and her mother, Arifa” (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 323-24). Musa is traumatised by this incident and later writes a letter to his dead daughter, which is also inserted into the novel and must be understood as a separate form that further splits up the network’s element, or incomplete whole, that focuses on Musa: “Do you think I’m going to miss you? You are wrong. I will never miss you, because you will always be with me. You wanted me to tell you real stories, but I don’t know what is real any more. [...] What I know for sure is only this: in our Kashmir the dead will live for ever; and the living are only dead people, pretending. [...]” (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 342-43). The letter is once more a way of zooming in as it provides an insight into the feelings of Musa, who is trying to cope with his loss. However, he is not granted much time to grieve as he “would have to pre-empt Amrik Singh’s next move, and quickly. Life as he once knew it was over. He knew that Kashmir had swallowed him and he was now part of its entrails” (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 344). The omniscient narrator has the aim to provide an overview of what is happening in Kashmir and to make the broad contours clear, whereas the form of the letter, which interrupts, or rather complements, this overview, shows how the conflict affects people on an emotional level. As Natasha Walter also notes in her review of the novel, “[t]he sense that many of the most important wars and riots are inside, not outside, the characters, is vital to the impact of this novel. Nobody is at peace, everyone is restless with unsaid memories and unattained dreams” (n.p.). The omniscient narrator then continues to inform the reader about Musa’s life underground and a meeting with Tilo, who is afterwards arrested and tortured by Amrik Singh (cf. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 345-93), revealing the connections between several of the network’s elements. Additionally, even though the narrator is omniscient, the events are not presented in chronological order, which must be understood as both a feature of trauma narrative and a way of showing that life stories cannot easily be told in a linear fashion. Tilo survives the torture and goes back to Delhi, where she moves into Biplab’s flat and later to Anjum’s graveyard with the baby she had picked up from the pavement. As Monaco argues, “[...] Roy balances scenes of loss and decay with glimpses of irony, giddiness and hope and it is a new birth that eventually connects Tilo to Anjum” (67-68).

### **Creating Wholeness and Closure**

When Tilo moves to the graveyard with the baby, two crucial elements of the network merge into one whole; the narrator completes Anjum’s story from the first few chapters of the novel,

which must, retrospectively, also be considered an element of the network, and connects it to Tilo’s, which then comes to convey a sense of closure as well.



To Tilo, the move to the graveyard is, surprisingly, a liberating experience, and, “[f]or the first time in her life, Tilo felt that her body had enough room to accommodate all its organs” (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 305). Additionally, in the last and in the third to last chapter, the omniscient narrator outlines Anjum’s success as she has managed to turn the graveyard into a refuge for social outcasts and created an inclusive community without prejudices or social boundaries. The narrator does therefore not only create a sense of closure with regard to Tilo and Anjum’s personal stories but implies that this sense of wholeness may extend to an entire marginalised community. When Anjum later receives the letter of a Telugu woman, who turns out to be the baby’s mother, the questions surrounding the baby’s origin are finally answered as well, thus contributing to the creation of closure. The mother explains that she had been deeply involved in communist politics, got raped by six police officers, and intended to kill the baby after giving birth (cf. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 417-26). This indicates that, at this point, even more of the network’s fairly independent elements are integrated into the whole that the narrator creates during the final few chapters.

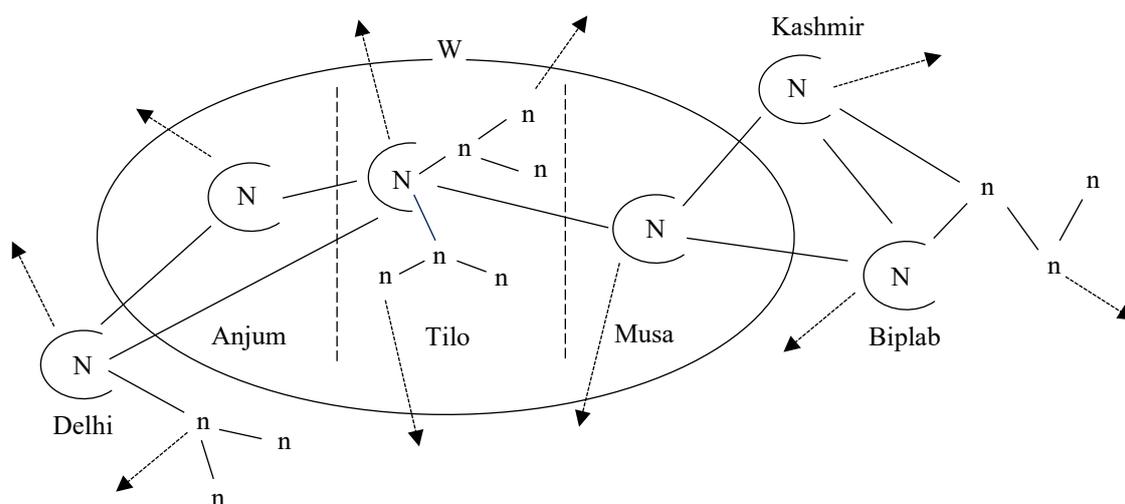
However, there are also several elements that do not become part of this whole but remain outside of it, for instance those in which Biplab appears as a first-person narrator. In fact, the whole that is created during the last few chapters set in the graveyard is once more interrupted when the narrator switches back to Biplab in the penultimate chapter of the novel. His personal situation still seems to be hopeless, and he additionally notes that the situation in Kashmir is also unlikely to change: “From what I can tell, it’s no longer the case that security forces are attacking people. It seems to be the other way around now. People – ordinary people, not militants – are attacking the forces. Kids on the streets with stones in their hands are facing

down soldiers with guns; villagers armed with sticks and shovels are sweeping down mountainsides and overwhelming army camps. If the soldiers fire at them and kill a few, the protests just swell some more” (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 429). This statement implies that it would be impossible to integrate all of the network’s elements surrounding the Kashmir conflict into the whole and that the network will thus continue to expand in this respect. Biplab therefore also remains outside of the whole that is finally created in terms of both structure and content. In contrast, Musa, who turns up at Biplab’s flat to pick up some of the items Tilo has stored there, will finally move to Anjum’s graveyard as well, where he is reunited with Tilo, even though the narrator reveals on the last few pages of the novel that, after one night he spends with her, “[h]e would leave for Kashmir the next morning, to return to a new phase in an old war from which, this time, he would not return” (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 437). Even though this adds a bitter aftertaste to the happy ending, the fact that the narrator chooses to create closure in several respects at the end of the novel is surprising after a fragmented and mostly non-linear narrative that is made up of various heterogenous forms. In fact, in the course of the novel, it seems to be impossible to convert any of the network’s loose pieces into one unified whole, but this is what the narrator indeed manages to do in the final few chapters. Thus, the reader’s expectation of closure at the end of a novel is fulfilled, which is surprising in the case of a narrative that had so far distanced itself from conventional storytelling techniques in several respects. As Swati Ganguly suggests with regard to the ending of the novel, “[i]t brings all the protagonists to one place: the Jannat or Paradise of the graveyard, the place for all who have been rejected by Duniya, the Weevil Devil World. For a novel that seeks to tell the stories of *all* the marginalities produced under the shadow of jingoistic nationalism, majoritarian state, and global capital, its closure seems a fairy-tale wish-fulfilment” (137, emphasis in the original).

Even though it appears to be unrealistic, the omniscient narrator is finally able to assemble at least the main elements of the network into one unified whole, which is also reflected in a note by Tilo that Musa discovers the night before leaving for Kashmir: “*How to tell a shattered story? By slowly becoming everybody. No. By slowly becoming everything*” (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 436, emphasis in the original). With regard to the formal arrangement of the entire novel, Tilo’s thought suggests that the various separate forms the novel consists of can only be turned into one unified whole by an omniscient narrator who is able to see and “become everything.” This idea of “becoming everything” entails an extensive overview of the stories of a wide range of characters and documents that may interact and clash with each other. Iyer also explores the implications of this idea in detail, arguing that

[t]his brief poem [Tilo’s note] encompasses Roy’s underlying premise of this novel. She is writing the fragmented and broken narrative of a nation. There are many stories that must be recovered and that need a ‘stenographer.’ Such stories can be told only when the teller becomes everyone and everything. What does such becoming entail? Is it the ability to imaginatively enter the consciousness of a person or thing vastly different from you? Is it embodying everyone and everything? Can an upper-caste woman become a Dalit and tell his story? Can a cisgendered Syrian Christian woman embody a transgender Muslim? Roy’s response is to write a novel that is very loosely held together by an assortment of characters and where the last words belong to a dung beetle who lay on his back ‘to save the world in case the heavens fell’ and who celebrated the foundling girl, Miss Udaya Jabeen [sic], born of the gang rape of a Maoist activist, kidnapped by a woman who did [not] want to be a mother, and raised by a hijra who passionately wanted to be one [...]. (171)

Despite this sense of closure that is finally created, the various heterogenous forms of the network have demonstrated throughout the narrative that it is only seemingly possible to “become everything” and to comprehend and explore all of the forces that keep fragmenting Indian society, even though it is the narrator’s aim to convey this impression. Hence, the narrator’s attempt to “become everything” in fact reveals the impossibility of such an endeavour. This may justify Swati Ganguly’s criticism that “[t]he novel remains, like Roy’s long non-fictional trajectory, a work of fierce defiance against what she considers the Hindu, hegemonic state but fails to offer any subtle examination of the many human tragedies that the state has produced over the last twenty years” (137). Even though the omniscient narrator is seemingly able to create a unified whole at the end of the novel, it remains clear that it is never possible to see and “become everything,” neither in fiction nor in real life.



### 6.3 From 'I' to 'We' and 'You': Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess*

Meena Kandasamy was born in Tamil Nadu in 1984, and is a poet, novelist, translator and political activist. As Sathyaraj Venkatesan and Rajesh James point out, "[...] her oeuvre is a response to issues related to caste politics, feminism, and gender violence that plague contemporary India" (143). In addition to her two poetry collections, *Touch* (2006) and *Ms Militancy* (2010), Kandasamy has published three formally inventive novels so far: *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014), which focuses on caste politics and a real-life massacre, *When I Hit You* (2017), which was shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction and presents an anonymous narrator who reflects on the abusive relationship with her husband, and *Exquisite Cadavers* (2019), in which "Indian political horrors alternate with domestic London life," creating "an innovative tale that fuses reality and fiction" (Williams n.p).

#### ***The Gypsy Goddess: An Overview of Content and Form***

Kandasamy's first novel is based on the Kilvenmani massacre, which took place in a small village in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu in 1968, following tensions between Dalit labourers, campaigning for higher wages, and their landlords, united in the Paddy Producers Association led by Gopalakrishna Naidu. Forty-four untouchables who lived in the village were killed during the massacre, allegedly by the group of landlords the strike was directed against. Influenced by communist politics, the Dalit labourers had stopped working, hoping to be granted fair wages and better working conditions. When the mob entered the village, setting the homes of the workers on fire, many untouchables fled to a nearby hut. The mob subsequently set the hut on fire as well, burning all the people who were hiding in it, mostly women, children and elderly people.

Instead of retelling the events surrounding the massacre in a linear narrative, Kandasamy's novel aims to establish an alternative truth in favour of the victims, who had never been able to make their voices heard, undermining conventional storytelling techniques of any kind and openly addressing the difficulty of composing a novel about a real-life massacre. As Kanak Yadav also points out, "[...] *The Gypsy Goddess* archives the 'alternative truth' of Kilvenmani in a heterogeneous narrative" (119). Reviewer Kavita Bhanot adds that

[t]he novel depicts this narrative from various angles: a Memorandum of the Paddy Producers' Association, a group formed by landowners to protect their interests against the organising communists, a Marxist Party Pamphlet, police reports, eye-witness

accounts, slices of the lives of the Dalit peasants, and a witty author/narrator who frames the story. This narrator directly addresses the reader, making clear her refusal to make it an easy ride, to tell a linear tale, to explain, to exoticise, to give the reader what he/she expects from an Indian English-language novel. (n.p.)

This structural arrangement conveys a sense of fragmentation as the various unconnected forms keep interrupting each other throughout the narrative. However, on closer examination, it becomes clear that the way the narrator, who eagerly, and slightly aggressively, searches for adequate storytelling techniques, arranges these forms empowers the voiceless and gradually contributes to the establishment of an alternative truth. This self-reflexive process is, at the same time, a powerful tool to criticise the initiators of the dominant discourse, particularly the Indian state authorities, the landlords and the media, united by their endeavour to cover up the injustices against the voiceless members of the very bottom of the social hierarchy. Yadav explains this issue in more detail:

While the massacre received the attention of mainstream media, they preferred to read it as a clash between peasant groups. The headline of the newspaper *The Hindu* (1968, December 27) manifests how the newspapers privileged the class component of the narrative: '42 Persons Burnt alive in Thanjavur Village following Kisan clashes'. Similarly, some other reports perceived the massacre either as an 'agrarian unrest' (*The Hindu*, 1968, December 27) or else as 'a clash between two groups of kisans' (*The Hindu*, 1968, December 28). Although there were clashes between the local agricultural labourers and the labourers employed from outside the village, newspaper reports understated the role played by the landlords and also overlooked the caste dimension to the massacre as all 44 deceased labourers were Dalits. (114)

The narrator of the novel, who is close to the empirical author, does deliberately not pretend to be omniscient and instead focuses on how narratives are constructed and establish truth. Hence, "[a]gainst official narratives of the State and the Judiciary as well as counter official narratives that intend to revise but also perpetuate a global discourse which homogenizes the massacre [...], *The Gypsy Goddess* validates its project of filling the gaps and silences in history" (Yadav 115). Dolores Herrero adds that,

[i]n keeping with some central postmodernist tenets, such as: the questioning of all kinds of universal or official, and by extension realist, discourses as transparent accounts of reality; the relative nature of *truth*, always linked with power; and the urgent need to realize that ideology, or how one particular culture represents itself to itself, systematically naturalizes narrative representation by offering what actually is constructed meaning as something inherent in that which is being represented, *The Gypsy Goddess* strives to show that the past is no longer an objectified entity that can be fully grasped and comprehended, and thus naturally represented. (71-72)

In the course of the narrative, the narrator slowly retreats, enabling the victims to provide their perspectives and to make their individual voices heard, which finally merge into one

powerful collective voice. More precisely, the novel is divided into four large parts and also provides a prologue and an epilogue. The various unconnected forms that can be identified in each section fulfil a specific purpose in the process of initiating an alternative discourse. The prologue presents a letter by Naidu, head of the Paddy Producers Association, who seeks help from the Chief Minister due to growing tensions with the workers. After this apparent establishment of a narrative hierarchy in favour of the landlords, the narrator of the following part of the novel aims to write against this discourse by generating a horizontal network of voices that is gradually turned into a whole and opposed to the dominant discourse established at the beginning of the novel. In the first part of the novel, *Background*, the narrator reflects on adequate storytelling techniques for this type of content, providing a base for the process of gradually establishing an alternative truth. The second part, *Breeding Ground*, includes both reflections by the narrator on how the novel might be received when it is published and snippets of the story the narrator intends to tell, initiating a network of voices against the dominant discourse. The third part, *Battleground*, extends this network by shifting more and more attention to some of the victims of the massacre, who retell the events surrounding the attacks from their individual perspectives. The last part, *Burial Ground*, depicts the workers' unsuccessful fight for justice in the aftermath of the attacks, converting the network of voices into one unified whole. The epilogue shifts attention to the reader, who is asked to imagine going to the village to talk to the witnesses of the massacre in person, thus implying that the reader is responsible for keeping up the newly-established counter-discourse. The following analysis will examine this process in more detail, demonstrating how the novel's various, seemingly unconnected, forms are arranged to establish this alternative truth and thus also create a sense of wholeness.

### **Naidu's Letter in the Prologue: The First Whole**

The first form of the novel, which must be understood as an independent whole, is the letter by Naidu, who depicts the current situation between the landlords and their workers, hoping to receive support from the Chief Minister: "For the past ten years, agricultural coolies have been constantly demanding an increase in their daily wages, and whenever it has been denied to them, they have organized strikes and paralysed life in our district" (*The Gypsy Goddess* 3). Naidu then outlines the current situation and the evils caused by the spread of communist ideals in more detail, before concluding that

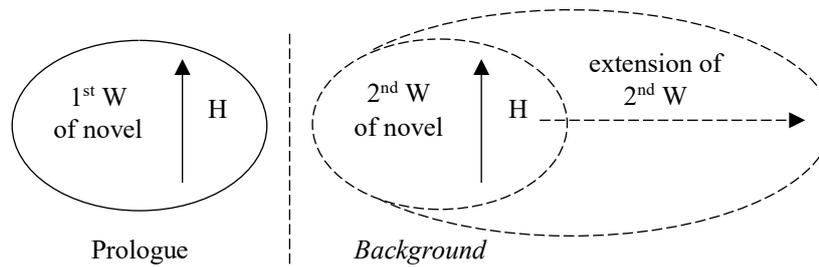
[n]ow the time has come to destroy the dogma of communism that has divided the people into classes and set them against each other. If left unchecked, these weeds in our society will choke the hope of any future harvest. It is respectfully prayed that as the Honourable Chief Minister, Your Excellency shall interfere in this grave matter at the earliest and take necessary steps to restore the lost confidence of the terror-stricken landowners who are living in a constant state of fear, and thereby liberate Nagapattinam from the clutches of Communists in order to prevent violence and bloodshed. (*The Gypsy Goddess* 8)

In the letter, Naidu functions as a first-person narrator who reports his fears to the Chief Minister. Yadav adds that, “[i]n the prologue to the novel, the collaboration of the landlords and the State is manifest in an official letter that Gopal Krishna Naidu (president of the Paddy Producers Association – a collaboration of *mirasdars* [landlords]) writes to the Chief Minister [...]” (115). As there is no mediator in the form of an omniscient narrator, Naidu’s perspective is the only one that is offered to the reader at this point. The social hierarchies that exist between the landowners and their workers are therefore also reflected in terms of narrative technique. The workers are not granted any chance to provide their perspectives or to defend themselves against the accusations made by Naidu in the letter; they are voiceless and not defended by an omniscient narrator either, who could potentially provide an insight into the viewpoints of both parties involved in the conflict. Nevertheless, the letter is only a single document, or one separate whole, whose scope is limited and whose narrator is therefore only granted a limited space to express his opinions. Hence, even though the letter establishes hierarchies in terms of form and content right at the beginning of the novel, it remains a separate form, which is unlikely to maintain its power during the narrative to follow. In fact, “[b]y placing a fictionally constructed official letter as a backdrop, the writer creates an official discourse within her narrative against which she will be writing” (Yadav 115).

### **The Narrator-Novelist Takes over: The Second Whole**

The following first part of the novel initially moves to the narrator, who calls herself “narrator-novelist” (*The Gypsy Goddess* 49) and reflects on how to write a novel about a real-life massacre. This narrator-novelist takes over control in this second form of the novel, which undermines the previously established narrative hierarchy even though this form is not (yet) opposed to Naidu’s letter but must be considered a separate whole that exists next to it. However, it will gradually become clear that the narrator-novelist’s whole extends

throughout the entire novel, even if it becomes increasingly invisible in the course of the narrative.



The narrator-novelist’s first observation is that “[i]t is difficult to write a novel living in a land where despotic bards ensured that for more than a thousand years, literature existed only in the form of poetry – alliteration under the armpit, algebra around the rhyming feet” (*The Gypsy Goddess* 11). After reflecting on the development of prose fiction in India, the narrator-novelist eventually shifts her attention “[b]ack to this novel: Tamil in taste, English on the tongue, free of all poetry and prosody, dished out in dandy prose. Forgive this text its nagging tendency to try and explain, its disposition to tag its opinion at every turn of phrase” (*The Gypsy Goddess* 12). After this self-confident comment and direct address to the reader, the narrator-novelist seemingly starts the story by revealing that, “[o]nce upon a time, in one tiny village, there lived an old woman” (*The Gypsy Goddess* 13, emphasis in the original). However, she afterwards adds potential criticism of this conventional opening line: “Writing in the summer of the Spring Revolution, I anticipate everybody to be let down by an opening line that does not contain one oblique reference to a grenade, or a crusade, or even the underplayed and tabooed favourite, genocide” (*The Gypsy Goddess* 13). As Herrero points out with reference to this part of the novel, “Part One, titled *Background*, is a literary, and to some extent also philosophical, digression into the author’s anxieties about how to tell her story; about the subversive power of the novel’s hybrid English, [...] about her choices of the standpoints from where to construct the narrative; about the numbing effect of nostalgia or exotica in many contemporary Indian novels; and about the relativity and unreliability of official historical discourses” (73). After the letter of the prologue, focusing on the conflict between the landowners and their workers, this second form opens up a metafictional dimension, featuring a narrator who is initially not even interested in a reflection on how to narrate the story addressed in the prologue in particular but in an examination of the status and reception of (female) novelists from former colonies in the West in general: “A first-generation woman novelist evidently working in a second language from that third-world country, literary critics may pooh-pooh and pin me down with prize-orange tartness after

reading such a tame line, and prepare to expect nothing more than a domestic dramatic-traumatic tale. Let them jest in peace” (*The Gypsy Goddess* 13). The narrator’s goals are therefore two-fold: she is not only searching for adequate storytelling techniques to write about a real-life massacre but also examines the status of contemporary writers and the pressure inflicted on them by the publishing industry, raising awareness of wrong expectations and the question of authenticity. In fact, by pursuing these two goals at the same time, the narrator draws attention to the potential power of writers and publishers in shaping the dominant discourse about a topic. The narrator explains these issues in more detail on the following pages, now referring to the story about the massacre she wants to write in particular:

*Once upon some time, in some village of some size, there lived an old woman.*

English, with its expertise of having administered the world, requires more efficiency. Not these breaks and starts. Perhaps the first line should frame the conflict and grip the reader with the revelation that this old woman eventually loses her extended family during a massacre. Or perhaps the first line should not bother about one old woman, and, instead, it should reflect on a universal issue: untouchability or class struggle. Or perhaps the first line should not concern itself with character or conflict, and instead talk about the land that fed the world but forgot to feed all of her own people. (*The Gypsy Goddess* 14-15, emphasis in the original)

As Yadav points out, “[s]uch self-reflexive commentary portraying the construction of the novel familiarizes the reader with the gravity of the project while [it] also provides reasons for withholding from a linear narrative” (116). In addition to her reflection on finding the right balance between offering an authentic retelling of the events surrounding the massacre and meeting the expectations of publishers and audiences, she already offers some background information on the old woman. In fact, she keeps reflecting on how she could shape the content of the novel:

Kilvenmani, the village into which the Old Woman married, is irrigated by two tributaries of the Cauvery: Korai Aaru and Kaduvai Aaru. [...] Rivers are to rice cultivation what lies are to poets: the lifeblood, some might say. Some life, some blood, I will hasten to add. Initially, I wanted to put this section on poets and rivers down as a footnote and forget everything about the fictional element. Last time I wrote a footnote, however, I made the mistake of suggesting that Ponnar and Sankar, two local guardian deities, were Arundhatiyars, an oppressed untouchable caste, and a case was slapped on me by the touchy touchable caste-Hindus seven years after the book appeared. [...] So, my attempts to create a piece of fiction out of facts by telling a story from long, long ago, about an Old Woman in a tiny village, have been shelved until it is time for the thousand and ninth narration. Be consoled that to make up for the form being frivolous, the subject shall be serious. (*The Gypsy Goddess* 20)

The narrator-novelist's angry comment once more raises awareness of the pressures inflicted upon writers by their potential audiences. She criticises the fact that even one wrong suggestion may have the potential to trigger an enormous backlash, particularly if it is related to sensitive topics such as untouchability, as it may pose a threat to the hegemony of the dominant classes, who shape the dominant discourse. As Bhanot notes with reference to this self-reflexive dimension of the novel, "[t]he narrator anticipates much of the potential criticism of the novel in a way that is disarming and clever, but also, at times, irritating, in particular in the extended opening – the 'background' – where we feel impatient for the story to start. Indeed, throughout the novel, it is almost with guilt that the reader wishes for more story, for an anchor, for characters who draw us in" (n.p.). Reviewer Aishwarya Subramanian is also critical of the extensive reflections on her storytelling techniques:

It's a criticism that the book accepts as valid even if, by pre-empting it, it puts the reviewer in something of a double bind. This sort of self-referential, self-critical writing can become a closed circuit, too focused on its own mechanics to say anything about the world outside it. Which is fine, in some cases, but Kandasamy has chosen for her subject a story that does, for sound political and moral reasons, need to be told more often; and a story that deserves not to be crowded out of the book (and subsequently reviews like this one) by the literary pyrotechnics of the author. It's in this unresolvable clash of writerly ideals, the reporter's duty to bear witness versus the 21st century novelist's ethical need to re-examine the question of the novel itself, that *The Gypsy Goddess* situates itself. Failure is inevitable. (n.p.)

The last comment of the first chapter of the section *Background* suggests that the story may finally start in the following one: "Enough about the Old Woman. You will soon get to hear her speak, watch her move. Meanwhile, remember this: nobody lived happily. Nobody outlived the ever-after" (*The Gypsy Goddess* 37). However, instead of finally starting the story about the old woman and the massacre that has been mentioned several times by now, the following chapter, which is still part of the section *Background*, offers a reflection on the title of the novel:

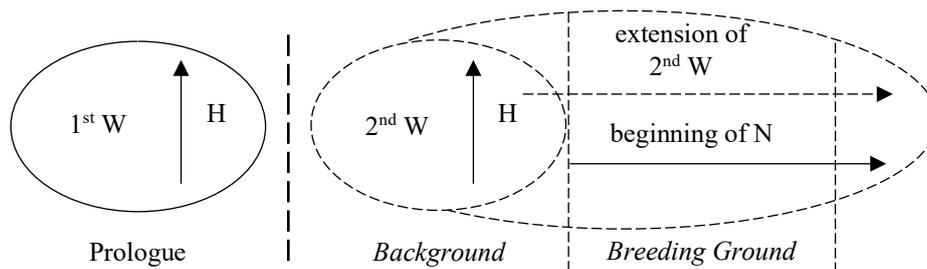
When you are high on caffeine and contemporary authors, you begin to question the fundamentals of the publishing industry, which you think owes it to you to make your novel widely read. After all, for the sake of reading widely, you have contributed an unfortunately large amount of your small income to the said industry. Take the title for instance: it has to be catchy, it has to incite curiosity, it has to sound cool when you say it to others. That's why I settled on this one. Well, almost. It satisfies all of the above criteria. (*The Gypsy Goddess* 39)

She tries to meet all the expectations of the publishing industry by choosing a title that seems to be a "curiously obscure and mildly enchanting choice, *The Gypsy Goddess*. I have a great title. I have a great story" (*The Gypsy Goddess* 41). The narrator thus mocks potential publishers, arguing that the pressure of choosing the perfect title is apparently so huge that it

does not even seem to matter if it is not directly connected to the content, as in the case of *The Gypsy Goddess*.

### Gradually Starting the Network within the Narrator-Novelist's Whole

The first chapter of the following part, *Breeding Ground*, can finally be understood as the beginning of the story and the first element of the network that the narrator-novelist employs in the process of establishing an alternative truth. However, this second part remains a hybrid form as its various small-scale forms alternate between further reflections on the writing process and reception of the novel, and snippets of the story about the massacre the narrator-novelist is finally beginning to tell. This part of the novel thus serves as a transitional form since it slowly shifts attention from the former to the latter, gradually providing more and more elements of the horizontal network that is generated to establish the counter-discourse.



The first chapter of this part and first element of the network depicts an emergency meeting of the landlords, united in the Paddy Producers Association. As Herrero notes in this context,

[t]he first chapter of Part Two (*The Cutthroat Comrades*) offers, in quite a realist mode, a critical description of Gopalakrishna Naidu's personality and of the autocratic way in which he conducts the Emergency Executive Committee Meeting of the Paddy Producers Association, to be followed by other chapters which, although swerving away from realism and a linear narrative style once again, nonetheless manage to plunge readers straight into the story of a village and a people. It must be noted that, however experimental this and the following sections may be, they paradoxically narrate a true story, part of the long history of caste conflict and the struggles of agricultural labourers in India. (74)

The new form is introduced by an omniscient narrator, describing Naidu's character and intentions: "Gopalakrishna Naidu had inherited all of Gandhi's adamancy, most of his self-righteousness and a wee bit of his desire to save humanity. Upon realizing that he was endowed with such a desirable mix of messianic attributes, he fashioned himself as a father-figure for the landlords of Nagapattinam and, therefore, had taken upon himself the timeless task of protecting

their vested and invested interests” (*The Gypsy Goddess* 49). The narrator-novelist of the previous part has seemingly disappeared and now employs an omniscient narrator who pursues interests similar to her own. This narrator is also biased and condemns the actions taken by the landowners, who present themselves as the victims of the ongoing conflict; the narrator therefore establishes a new narrative hierarchy and a counterweight to Naidu’s letter from the prologue. However, it does not take long until it becomes clear that this seemingly omniscient narrator is still the narrator-novelist from the previous chapter, who makes her presence felt when she notes the following: “Having introduced this balding, middle-aged man in three-and-a-half formidable sentences, I step aside as a big-mouthed narrator-novelist, and instead invite you to catch him on his campaign trail” (*The Gypsy Goddess* 49). The narrator-novelist therefore makes it clear that, in the following, she will focus on Naidu and the story about the massacre and not on her storytelling techniques. But instead of opting for a covert omniscient narrator who conveys the impression to readers that they are told the truth and that there are no doubts about this specific version of the story, the narrator-novelist of *The Gypsy Goddess* openly admits that the way she is telling the story is biased, her intention being to challenge the prevalent opinion among the Indian landowners that the workers are responsible for the massacre themselves. The dominance the letter from the prologue had established is now broken as the narrator-novelist takes over control and undermines the hierarchy in narrative terms. Naidu makes his viewpoint, which he had already outlined in the letter, clear during his speech, but this time the narrator-novelist is able to comment on it. Even though she is no omniscient narrator, she is able to convince the reader of her attitudes by emphasising the fact that she has thoroughly researched the topic she is writing about:

Now, how do I clear the air? Like all other writers before me, I ask you to trust me. Each mannerism of Gopalakrishna Naidu has been researched thoroughly and documented solely for the purpose of this novel – I could offer an accredited course about him if someone were willing to pay me to teach. In fact, this angry and ready-made rhetoric has enabled him to establish himself as a local leader. If you asked him (without sounding sarcastic or stupid) about his ability to breathlessly argue, he would be kind enough to admit that this is indeed a plus-point. I hope this was convincing enough. Now let me back into Ramu Thevar’s living room so that I can continue reporting. (*The Gypsy Goddess* 60)

The narrator-novelist makes it clear that she is not omniscient even though she has done thorough research. However, she pretends to be close to the scene, which is why she is able to report all of the details of the emergency meeting. She therefore demonstrates that a text is always written by a human being, who cannot be fully omniscient or offer a completely neutral depiction of events, making it clear that the dominant discourse, which seemingly establishes a

universal truth, must also be shaped by human beings, who are not omniscient and hold subjective attitudes. Hence, even though Naidu makes similar points as in the unmediated letter from the prologue, readers will perceive it differently this time. When he forcefully argues that “[i]t is our duty to protect the public interest” and that “[w]e should prevent Communist propaganda from seeping into us, from dividing us from our own people” (*The Gypsy Goddess* 62), it is clear that the narrator-novelist tries to undermine this rhetoric in order to establish an alternative truth.

The following chapter indicates that the whole the narrator-novelist has established in the first part, *Background*, extends into this second part of the narrative, forming a base or framework for the snippets of story that are scattered throughout the novel and make up the network; this independent network thus operates on a separate level but is situated within the narrator-novelist’s whole. The second chapter of the second part first presents a general reflection on how women in particular could be involved in protests, before there is a sudden structural break and a switch back to the narrator’s anger about the publishing industry and the audience. She inserts an imaginary Q&A into the text to emphasise her concerns once more. This sudden break within the second part of the novel, which had seemingly marked the beginning of the story about the massacre, may come as a surprise but is an important step to remind the reader of the fact that these concerns about how to narrate the story keep haunting the novelist throughout the entire writing process and therefore operate on a separate level that extends throughout the whole novel:

*Why can't you fucking follow chronology?*

I can. If you observe carefully, you will not fail to note that everyone gets fucked in the due course of time.

*Why can't you follow a standard narrative format?*

If the reader wanted a straight, humourless version of the events that surrounded the single biggest caste atrocity in India, she would read a research paper in the *Economic and Political Weekly* or a balanced press report [...].

(*The Gypsy Goddess* 68, emphasis in the original)

As Subramanian notes with reference to the novel’s metafictional dimension,

[w]e are never allowed to forget that this is a story that is being told to us; Kandasamy (assuming the narrator and the author to be the same, as dangerous as that may be) will stop, restart, reflect on her narrative choices as she is making them, address her readers directly to inform them that they will not be getting what they expect. Occasionally, she will parody the style of the propaganda from one side or the other of the conflict between the landlords and the exploited labourers. (n.p.)

After this Q&A and the attack on the novel's potential critics, the chapter outlines what may happen "[w]hen women take to protest" (*The Gypsy Goddess* 75). The narrator-novelist tells the reader that "[o]nce they smashed pots to protest their poor wages. Once, when the Paddy Producers Association put up its yellow flag in their village, they hauled it down, set fire to it and broke the flagpost. Once they went to the fields to harvest in the middle of the night, saying that they alone would harvest the crops they sowed, and that the landlords had no business employing outside labour" (*The Gypsy Goddess* 75). As reviewer Akshaya Pillai adds, "[s]he loses you several times to bursts of self-indulgence and unconnected digressions, but brings you back with jolts of lyrical ache" (n.p.), which alludes to the powerful interplay between the network and the narrator-novelist's whole, in which the network is situated.

This interplay is also emphasised in the following chapters, in which the narrator-novelist's reflections on adequate storytelling techniques are interwoven with background information on the development of the conflict between landowners and labourers, extending the network that establishes the counter-discourse:

As happens in stories of a similar nature, one village stood apart. Kilvenmani paid the token twenty-rupee fine for abstaining from work, but it didn't strike a deal, and it continued to strike. The one-day district-level strike had been marred by a murder, but their collective demand for higher wages was kept alive by Kilvenmani. Common sense and Communist thinking told them that their labour was indispensable in the harvest season. They expected the landlords to give in and grant them the daily wage of six measures of paddy they had been fighting for. But, the *mirasdars* saw no reason to relent. (*The Gypsy Goddess* 106)

In another short episode, the aims of the villagers are outlined: "The elders of Kilvenmani are clear about certain things: we are not asking for the land. We are not asking for homes. We are asking for food, for our six measures of paddy, because we are going hungry – because what we have, what we are getting paid, is not enough for our stomachs. We may die of starvation but until our demand is met, we are not giving up the strike" (*The Gypsy Goddess* 113). The villagers subsequently hold a village meeting as they are unwilling to give in and to accept the ongoing injustices. At this point, the narrator-novelist provides more comments on the limits of storytelling and the idea that omniscience is an illusion:

If you want to learn who was boozing that morning, who were the two lovers who stayed away from the village meeting for a secret rendezvous, or which was the one family that had switched its loyalty to Gopalakrishna Naidu, you won't find that information here. Okay, curiosity is inevitable and I can understand why you would want to know at least some of the things said at the village meeting. Of course, you are aware of the fact that I was not there, so to make up these monologues-dialogues-speeches-soliloquies on demand causes great discomfort to me as a writer. Here are three snippets. Go ahead, paste your smiley faces on them. (*The Gypsy Goddess* 118)

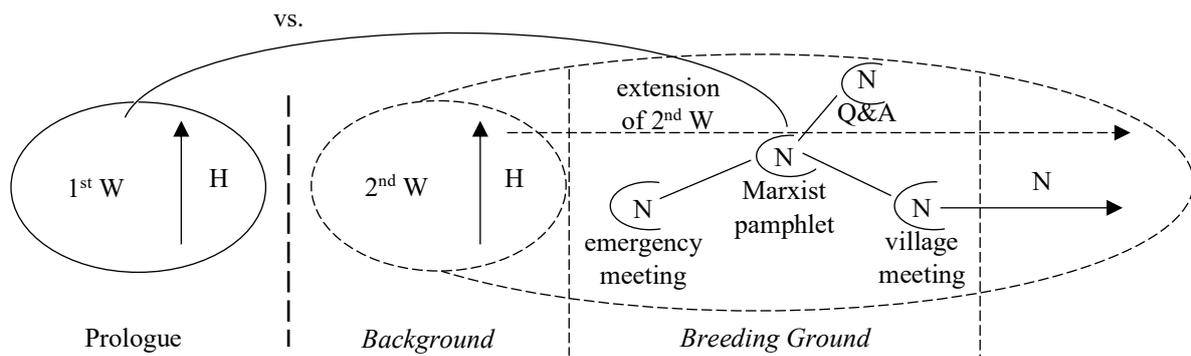
The narrator-novelist reluctantly provides these three snippets (cf. *The Gypsy Goddess* 118-20) and even mocks the reader, who might have specific expectations of a novel and its narrator. However, in the last chapter of this second part, the narrator-novelist, ironically, even dares to step into the fictional world to become Naidu's letter-writer, thus connecting the two different story levels and undermining conventional storytelling techniques even further. At the beginning of this chapter, she reveals that she will not be able to look her mother in the eye anymore but that "[s]ome day she will understand the multifarious circumstances that demanded [her] to step into the slippers of Seshappa Iyer, Gopalakrishna Naidu's legal consultant and Srinivasa Naidu, his regular letter-writer" (*The Gypsy Goddess* 130). When snippets of the letter she is forced to write are inserted into the novel, she additionally reveals how difficult the writing process is to her: "When I am not set a word count, or there is no mention of a deadline, my imagination crumbles. Thankfully, he [Naidu] comes up with an instruction: 'All you have to write to the chief minister is that communism will kill me'" (*The Gypsy Goddess* 130). The narrator-novelist voices her aversion towards conventional storytelling techniques once more at the end of the chapter: "Because I have taken pleasure in the aggressive act of clobbering you with metafictional devices, I can hear some of you go: what happened to the rules of a novel? They are hanging on my clothesline over there" (*The Gypsy Goddess* 128). As Subramanian notes in this respect, "[...] we are rarely in danger of losing the critical distance that the author has demanded of us" (n.p.), and Bhanot adds that

[t]he importance of this narrative voice [...] is in laying out the impossibility of the task at hand: of the need to create a separation between author and story. Kandasamy has the sensitivity to recognise her limitations (and power) in an attempt at representation. The Facebook-using, urban, educated, middle-class author/narrator is a world away from the villagers who inhabit the novel, as is the form and language into which she is fitting them. (n.p.)

In the middle of this second part of the novel, the narrator also adds a Marxist pamphlet, which is, just like Naidu's letter from the prologue, unmediated. It forms a counterweight to Naidu's letter and introduces one of the first oppositional voices, thus adding another important element to the network that gradually establishes the counter-discourse:

Harvest is the season where patriotic myths come to die. It is the season when pacts are flouted, working people are hounded and Communist cadres are killed by the landlords. The murder of our comrade, Sikkal Pakkirisamy, in broad daylight on 15<sup>th</sup> November 1968, is not an isolated incident that should spark anger and tension only in Nagapattinam. On the contrary, it concerns everyone. One must be reminded that the landlords had him killed on the day of agricultural strike in East Tanjore, during the public procession, in order to spread terror among the peasants and labourers. (*The Gypsy Goddess* 83)

After addressing the murder of Sikkal Pakkirisamy, the first-person narrator of the pamphlet lists the goals the communists have already obtained, before noting that they “still have not achieved [their] dream of land redistribution” (*The Gypsy Goddess* 88). Towards the end of the pamphlet, the narrator also argues that “[t]he Paddy Producers Association must be banned for the sake of democracy” (*The Gypsy Goddess* 97) and that they have to continue fighting for their goals and justice. The party pamphlet therefore forms a counterweight to Naidu’s letter from the prologue, and, considering that it appears at a later stage during the narrative, it has a more powerful impact; the power is thus gradually shifted to the communists and the victims of the massacre, whereas Naidu’s letter has probably already fallen into oblivion. This demonstrates that the order in which the various forms appear is not random, even though they are not directly connected to each other and may at first not seem to appear in a meaningful order.



### Extending the Victims’ Network

The following third part, *Battleground*, shifts even more attention to the voiceless victims of the massacre the conflict finally culminates in, adding more elements to the network that establishes the counter-discourse. As Yadav adds, “[t]he second half of the novel moves beyond language to capture the collective trauma of the massacre while the first half foregrounded the impossibility of such an attempt” (118). The first chapter of the second half focuses on the police inspector who is supposed to identify the dead. As the narrator-novelist ironically remarks with regard to this difficult endeavour, “[i]t would be cruel not to appreciate Inspector Rajavel’s labours, and criminal to suppress the facts of the massacre. Therefore his observations have been shared hereunder, and the tabulation shall tell this tale” (*The Gypsy Goddess* 150). On the following few pages, there is a list of all of the victims of the massacre:

1. Male, age not known, nobody can identify body; height 4'10"; marital status not known; protruding tongue, body totally burnt below the hip, hand flexed at the elbow, blackened blood all over the body
2. Subban Saambaan, aged about 70 years, son of Pakkirisamy; Harijan; height 5'; identification marks not visible as corpse completely burnt; married; hair partially singed, left arm and feet blackened, laceration on the abdomen  
[...]
41. Burnt, blackened, male torso; 3'6" in height; marital status unknown; skull and skeleton intact, male genitalia partially burnt, remaining body is roasted
42. A charred skull and tiny body; other details not known.

(*The Gypsy Goddess* 151-56)

The list must be understood as a separate form and a powerful element of the novel's network as it draws attention to the cruelties committed against the Dalit labourers, whose bodies are so badly burned that it is even impossible to identify them in some cases. Yadav further points out in this context that "[w]hether it is the number of deceased persons which was counted to be 42, instead of 44, in official discourse or the events that triggered and culminated in the 25 December brutal massacre, Kandasamy's narrative reveals the fissures in official data as well as the secret alliance between the landlords, the State and the Judiciary" (115). Additionally, the narrator-novelist has almost disappeared at this point, placing focus on the horrible effects of the massacre and implying that images, or, in this case, exact descriptions of the corpses, may have a stronger impact on their own and do not require further comments.

The following chapters of this third part shift attention to the witnesses of the massacre, whose voices will now be heard, further expanding the network to reconstruct what must really have happened; the more this network of oppositional voices expands, the greater its power to establish a recognisable counter-discourse against that of the landlords responsible for the massacre. The narrator-novelist grants the first witness the freedom to express his thoughts in the first person. It is a boy who explains what exactly happened on the day of the horrible massacre:

They started shooting. They were moving in. They were shouting. They set fire to the roof of the huts. They took the straw from one burning thatched roof to set fire to another. Then all the burning huts lit up the village. We saw fleeing figures. We heard bamboo splinters blast. Then everything happened at once. We heard the screaming. The loud screams filled up the land. My little sister and I were crouching like monkeys. I held her tight to stop her running. She sat still. She did not know what was going on. I put my hand on her mouth so that she would not join the screaming. (*The Gypsy Goddess* 159-60)

Additionally, the reader finally encounters the old woman the narrator-novelist had referred to during the first part of the novel as the boy mentions her too: "Then I came outside holding my

sister. We ran towards our home. The sky was yellow and black with fire and smoke. I heard an old woman crying. When I got closer, I could make out that it was Maayi paati” (*The Gypsy Goddess* 160).

The next chapter and element of the network is not presented by a first-person narrator but by an omniscient one and further written without punctuation, therefore taking up a special position within the network: “The streets are alight and the marauding mob of landlords is at arm’s length and those who have stayed behind in Kilvenmani apprehend its onward approach through shrill synchronized whistles piercing the cold night air and rapid gunshots being aimed at moving targets and the crackling noises of their homes bursting into flames and the screams of their women caught in the clutches of these attackers [...]” (*The Gypsy Goddess* 163). Reviewer Hirsh Sawhney notes in this context that “Kandasamy uses an array of iconoclastic narrative voices. One chapter is a breathless single sentence that evokes the massacre with lucid, haunting descriptions [...]” (n.p.). Herrero adds that “[t]here is no punctuation whatsoever, and the whole chapter becomes one single sentence that hauntingly reproduces the fragmented, convoluted, and distorted narrative of what could be the intrusive hallucination suffered by a traumatized survivor” (78). However, this narrator seems to be omniscient as they have the ability to report what exactly happens to the villagers who are hiding in the hut, which a first-person narrator could not do:

and at some point seeing becomes impossible because life has elapsed and so they no longer scare each other and instead they mourn in silence inside the torched hut as their muscles lose mass and begin to flex of their own free will arching joints into pyramids and the dying dance after their death as they are formed and deformed and their tongue-lolling soot-coated smiles only mean that pain is always followed by paralysis

and facial features disappear and flesh now starts splitting and shin bones show and hair sings with a strange smell and the flames hastily lick away at every last juicy bit as the bones learn to burst like dead wood and some of the singing bones spring to life and crack along the grain as if maintaining the beats of a secret and long-forgotten dirge because life has become extinct and there is no time for tears because death holds no terror

and so their lives go up in smoke but all of them are too dead to notice this vital fact of existence

and instead they burn all night fuelled by their own fat until the firemen come in the morning to wake them up by dousing their remains with cold water so that

the police can pick up the pieces to match the mangled body parts and attempt an accurate headcount of the dead [...]. (*The Gypsy Goddess* 165-66)

Gayatri Jayaraman notes in a review of the novel that “[t]his irreverent disregard for form, the inversions of structure, sentences often pages long, spoken with the frenzy of an eyewitness whose memories run into each other, make her work more poetry than prose. [...] And yet, in

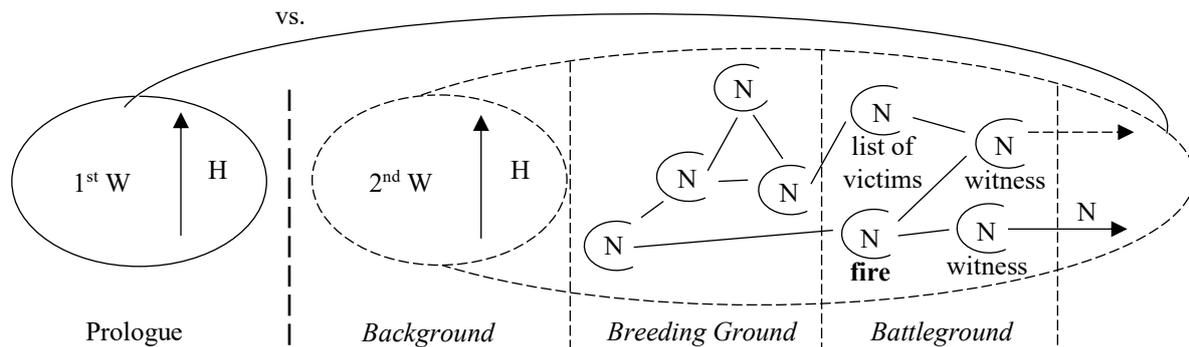
the reportage of its content, its will to present as authentic an account as caring for an incident lost to collective memory will make possible, it is non-fictional” (n.p.). After the description of what exactly the flames do to the bodies that are locked inside the hut, the narrator also refers to the difficult task of the police, who have to identify the dead bodies the next day, as previously indicated by the police officer’s list. The fact that the chapters are not presented in chronological order has an important impact on the recipients; after reading the chapter including the list of all the dead bodies the police officer had to identify, they may think that they have already learned about the most gruesome part of the massacre. However, when they reach the chapter describing how the bodies go up in flames, they notice that they had not heard about the worst bit yet. The fact that the chapter is written without punctuation and hence shaped by a specific subform implies that there is no way to stop the flames, which will therefore slowly and relentlessly eat up the bodies of the innocent people caught in the hut. The reader is additionally forced to continue reading and to pay attention to every single thing the flames are doing to the bodies of the victims. Kandasamy herself adds in an interview that “[t]hat’s how people talk. For instance, if you set fire to a hut, that is how people would respond; they would speak breathlessly and tell you what happened” (Kandasamy qtd. in Venkatesan, James 152), even though the narrator of this chapter rather seems to be omniscient. Additionally, the fact that chapters written in the first person alternate with chapters written in the third person throughout the whole section *Battleground* combines the personal perspectives of the witnesses, who report their experiences of the incident genuinely, with an overview of the details that not even the witnesses could see.

The chapter following the one about the flames presents another witness who reports his experiences in the first person. In fact, the witness is interviewed by the narrator-novelist, who sneaks back into the text at this point. The witness tells her the following: “It is not that night’s incidents alone, madam, you see this problem had been raging for three months and more, they were asking us to remove the flag, replace our red flag with their yellow flag, and you know this was not just polite please-do-it or can-you-do-it *panrengala? panna mudiyuma?* asking [...]” (*The Gypsy Goddess* 167). After making it clear that there had already been threats before the horrible massacre, the witness reports the incident that took place on the doomed day as well. He keeps addressing the interviewer, who is presumably the narrator-novelist, telling her that his report is genuine and that he would like her to publish his story:

I don’t know what you feel, or whose side you are on but I have told my story, sister, I haven’t lied to you, a man cannot lie when he has the taste of death on his tongue, I want you to write this all down and put it in the papers and tell the truth to the whole world. Let everyone read about what happened here and let them burn with anger. And yes,

you can note this too, my name is Ramalingam, I live on the same street were the tragedy took place, I have studied up to the eighth standard. (*The Gypsy Goddess* 182)

By presenting the voices of several witnesses in the form of first-person narratives, the narrator-novelist manages to establish an important part of the counter-discourse. The fact that all of the reports are part of the same horizontal network implies that they are all valid to the same extent and together form a counterweight to the dominant discourse established by the landlords and Indian state authorities.



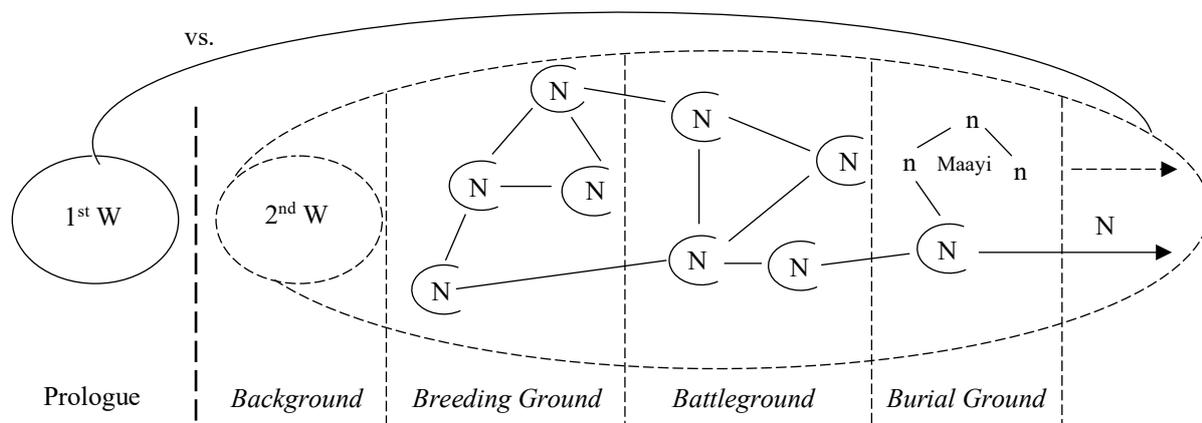
Additionally, the fact that the narrator-novelist sneaks back into the narrative and makes it clear that she is responsible for the way the stories are presented places emphasis on the initiators of a discourse; as the narrator-novelist interviews the witness herself, she draws attention to the fact that each discourse must be created by human beings, whose perspectives are never fully objective but could easily be presented as universal truths. It is therefore telling that the chapter that follows the one about the interview is written by a seemingly omniscient narrator (still the narrator-novelist) who clearly takes sides with the victims of the massacre and demonstrates how it is possible to initiate a counter-discourse and to establish an alternative truth. The narrator-novelist makes fun of the steps the authorities take in the aftermath of the massacre, pointing out that, “[n]ext, IG Mahadevan decided that the dead would not be returned to their relatives. This was his third charitable act of the day. He beamed with pride that he had solved the problem of handing over incomplete body parts of the unidentified victims” (*The Gypsy Goddess* 184). The narrator-novelist emphasises her viewpoint at the end of the chapter, noting that, “[f]rom the inside room, the policemen have collected pieces of singed clothes. Then, Constable Nayagan lays out the metallic remains: two toe-rings, a talisman, and a silver fig leaf that covered some child’s shame. Everything is carefully sealed in a bag. Every one of them knows that evidence will never be enough” (*The Gypsy Goddess* 191). She repeatedly condemns

the actions taken by the authorities, who support the landlords and therefore contribute to the establishment of their dominant discourse.

### **Maayi's Small-Scale Network within the Network**

After presenting the immediate aftermath of the massacre in the third part of the novel, the fourth one, *Burial Ground*, depicts the long-term effects and the untouchables' unsuccessful attempt to achieve justice. The single forms of the beginning of this section can be understood as a separate, small-scale network that is also part of the larger network of oppositional voices. This demonstrates that networks could, in theory, expand endlessly, even if there are breaks or gaps in time. The first chapter of this section is divided into several short paragraphs that outline how the survivors and relatives of the dead victims deal with the situation after the massacre. The narrator-novelist first remarks at the beginning of the chapter that, unfortunately, life goes on as if nothing had ever happened: "Everything would die its natural death. The visit of the politicians would fade out and journalists would stop being eager and this news would disappear from the headlines and fact-finding missions would be bored of report writing, and life in Kilvenmani would moodily limp back to normal" (*The Gypsy Goddess* 195). The narrator-novelist then moves back to Maayi, the old woman she had mentioned particularly during the first part of the novel, and addresses the reader directly: "Remember that there lived, once-upon-a-time, in-a-tiny-village, an Old Woman who made her debut in the very beginning of this novel? You were promised that if you were patient enough, you would hear her speak and watch her move through these pages. Now, it's time for you to know her on a first-name basis" (*The Gypsy Goddess* 197). The narrator-novelist keeps her promise from the beginning of the novel and now finally focuses on Maayi in detail. It goes without saying that this is another implicit critique of conventional storytelling as the protagonist is introduced after the main events have already taken place. As Sawhney notes in this context, "[t]he novel doesn't delve into the inner worlds of characters or possess an actual protagonist. But Kandasamy, a critically acclaimed poet, is attempting to immortalise the story of an entire community's struggle, and perhaps a more traditionally character-driven novel would have undermined this ambition" (n.p.). The narrator-novelist now adds some stories that feature Maayi as one of the main characters, but it is clear that she is not the protagonist of the whole narrative, which aims to focus on the trauma suffered by the collective. As the narrator-novelist points out with regard to Maayi, "[o]nce married to the village's witch doctor, it has now fallen upon her to hold her people together" (*The Gypsy Goddess* 197). For instance, she regularly visits another old

woman who “told Maayi that she thought her dead mother, Kaveri, was inside her, that her dead friends, Virammal and Sethu, were inside her and that their hearts were beating in her breast” (*The Gypsy Goddess* 199). The narrative then moves on to several other characters, including Muni, who “has lost his father and mother, he has lost his wife and two daughters. And he has lost two sisters-in-law, three nephews and a niece. Eleven members, a quarter of Kilvenmani’s dead” (*The Gypsy Goddess* 200). All of these short and separate narratives are held together by the appearance of Maayi, who is trying her best to support the village people after the massacre, and form an independent, small-scale network that is part of the novel’s larger network.



### The Victims’ ‘We’-Narrative: Converting the Network into a Powerful Whole

The separate stories and voices that make up this large network are turned into a powerful whole in the following chapter, which depicts the villagers’ long and unsuccessful attempts to achieve justice. The chapter is narrated in the first person plural, indicating that the villagers fight for justice as one powerful collective:

They came with relief supplies, we shouted them away. Could they produce our dead back again, in flesh and blood? Could they give us back our wives and our children and our parents? What were we to do with their clothes and their utensils and their rations? Were suckling infants underground comrades? Were schoolchildren full-timer Communists giving speeches from big, public platforms? Was forty-four lives the price for an extra measure of paddy? Was this our sacrifice for staying with the red flag? Why were our people in jails when it was us who had died? Were they running a state or a slaughterhouse? We told them that we did not want that blood-soaked, flesh-smoked rice. We told them that we did not want compensation, we wanted justice. They shook their heads and shrugged their shoulders and walked away. (*The Gypsy Goddess* 213)

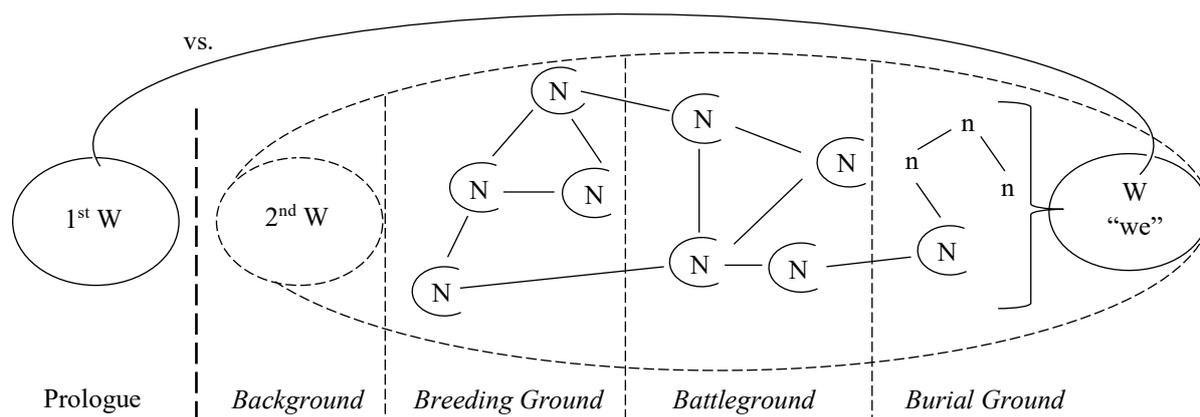
The villagers demand justice in an accusatory tone and insist on a clear opposition between ‘we’ and ‘they,’ which emphasises the counter-discourse against the dominant discourse created by the attackers and Indian state authorities. The victims outline how the police are involved in

supporting the aims of their landlords, pointing out that, “[d]uring the harvest season of 1968, the landlords had hired the police to work for them. The police had come from their camp and provided protection. The landlords, under police protection, had used hired labour from other districts; they went from village to village and they harvested the grain” (*The Gypsy Goddess* 224-25). It is therefore unsurprising that they are not able to achieve any success in legal terms either: “When we went to court, we heard that all the accused landlords were angry that this false case was being foisted on them. Twenty of them averred, in true son-of-a-shotgun fashion, that they did not own a gun, or a licence to hold a gun, or that any gun had been seized from them, or that they had surrendered a gun. [...] They denied all knowledge of the fires. They had fireproof alibis” (*The Gypsy Goddess* 226-27). The voiceless victims are unable to fight against the forces involved in shaping the official discourse, which is the reason for the narrator-novelist’s establishment of a counter-discourse in her fictional work, the aim being to avenge the victims’ deaths. The villagers additionally note the following:

The police filed a case against the landlords, but they also filed a case against us. Complaint and counter-complaint. We were angry that they had made out two cases: one for this side, one for that side; both for their entertainment. As if killing one agent of the landlords was equivalent to the killing of forty-four old men, women and children. Twenty-two of us became the accused in Irukkai Pakkirisami Pillai’s single murder case. (*The Gypsy Goddess* 228-29)

They add that they “saw the agent’s killing become a murder case, while the massacre was reduced to a connected arson case. We were sent to jail; most of us, in any case” (*The Gypsy Goddess* 229). Yadav notes in this context that “[...] the narrative of the eyewitnesses is not coherent and refuses chronology. Also, by the end of the novel, it is suggested that victims become perpetrators of violence” (118), but they seem to have no other choice. The villagers justifiably complain about the authorities’ cooperation with the attackers and the fact that it is impossible for them to achieve justice as they are neglected by the country’s legal system. As Bhanot also notes, “[t]hen there is the battle for justice, an impossible fight when the police are on the side of the landlords, when the political and legal system are disconnected from the lives of those at the very bottom” (n.p.). The villagers additionally note the following: “Soon, the government appointed a commission. It was called the Commission of Inquiry on Agrarian Labour Problems of East Tanjore District. [...] We went to the commission and repeated our stories. [...] Nothing happened after that. Neither to the commission nor to the agrarian labour problems of East Tanjore district. We forgot the commission and the commission forgot us” (*The Gypsy Goddess* 233). There are more strikes in the future, but without notable success: “All the accused were acquitted. All of them walked free. The fire of Kilvenmani had been

rekindled. We were burning with outrage. We told them that we did not want compensation. We also did not want their justice” (*The Gypsy Goddess* 256). Even though it is clear that the victims will never be granted justice and remain neglected by the legal system and Indian state authorities, who keep supporting the people at the top of the social hierarchy, the oppositional voices merge into one collective whole in this fourth part of the novel, thus at least achieving wholeness in the sense of establishing a counter-discourse in the realm of fiction.



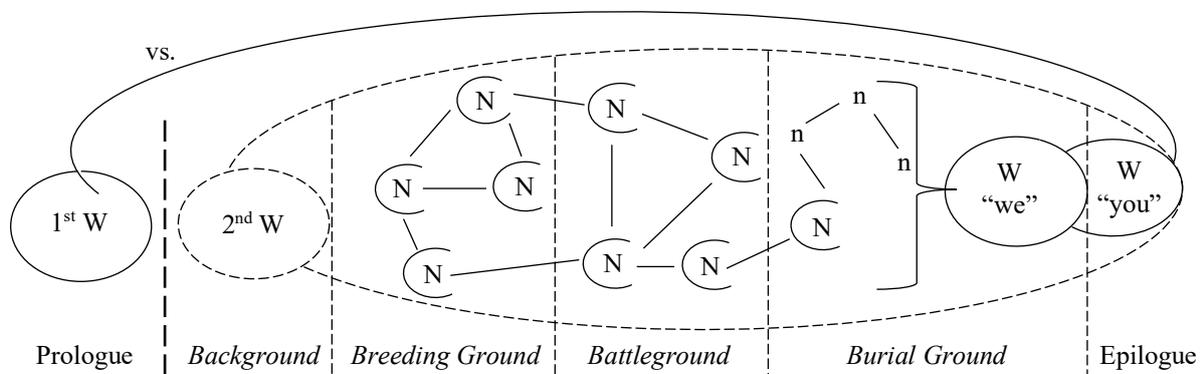
### The Epilogue: The Reader's Role in Creating Wholeness

The epilogue addresses the reader of the novel, shifting to a second-person narrative. The narrator-novelist is clearly in control again and puts the reader, who is part of the same story level like herself, into the victims' story, thus connecting the two levels and also achieving a sense of wholeness in this respect. Readers are asked to go to the village themselves a few years later to talk to the witnesses in person. The narrator-novelist tells the reader the following: "Armed with all this knowledge, you visit Kilvenmani. You want to get the atmosphere right. You want to get the season right. You go there during harvest time [...]. You go and meet Maayi, you want to measure up the old woman in my novel against the original one, you want to know if justice has been done to her. She is busy [...]" (*The Gypsy Goddess* 261). Readers are asked to critically assess any kind of information instead of blindly relying on potentially one-sided reports provided in newspapers. Herrero also notes that "[t]he Epilogue [...] invites the reader to become the writer who, like the narrator-author, goes to Kilvenmani and wants to talk to everybody, victims and perpetrators alike, in order to corroborate facts, gather evidence and testimonies, and thus produce a balanced and neutral article/report" (80). The epilogue implies that it is necessary for recipients to form their own opinions of the situation and that therefore all of the voices involved in the conflict have to be heard. It is thus also a critique of

the media as they may help shape the dominant discourse in favour of the dominant parties. Additionally, the novel makes it clear that fiction and non-fiction are not the same but that fiction is also capable of dealing with real-life events in an adequate fashion, which may require a questioning and redefining of conventional storytelling techniques. As Herrero also notes, “[t]he experimental nature of *The Gypsy Goddess* allows Kandasamy to confront readers with death, extreme violence, sheer injustice, and an unfair and unbearable reality that no conventional realist novel could have possibly depicted with such poignancy and forcefulness” (80). Further, “[...] fiction reveals itself as the weapon that can best attempt to unearth the hidden traumatic past, being nonetheless aware of the complex ethical problems that all representations of the past are bound to raise” (Herrero 77). Despite the novel’s various clashes of forms, the narrative finally evokes a sense of closure when the killing of Naidu is reported and the reader is in the village when the news spreads:

You impatiently wait in that house of many, many rooms when word reaches you that Gopalakrishna Naidu has been killed. At first, you do not believe the news of his death. You go to Kilvenmani to personally ascertain the facts of the assassination. You hear rumours of beheading. You hear rumours of forty-four parcels, each wrapped in palm fronds, sent to the people. But you shouldn’t believe all that you hear and you shouldn’t tell all that you believe. [...] You join the people of Kilvenmani – on the village streets, in their paddy fields, in their toddy shops – as they rejoice in the revenge. You know, more than anyone else, of how they have waited every day for this day. *Mudivu kandachu*. It has been completed. We have seen the end. (*The Gypsy Goddess* 272-73)

The reader is given the feeling of being actively involved in the establishment of the counter-discourse the villagers have initiated with the help of the narrator-novelist, and hence in the creation of wholeness. The reader is therefore more likely to maintain this newly-established counter-discourse and its alternative truth, so that it might one day turn into the dominant one.





## 7. Conclusion

The aim of this study has been to offer a new approach to narrative form, demonstrating that each formal arrangement of a work of fiction has its specific affordances and produces specific effects in relation to other forms and the content. Inventive formal arrangements in recent Indian English novels that draw attention to the limitations of a simplistic binary opposition between realist and experimental have given rise to this search for a new approach to narrative form in the present study. After pointing out the difficulties in classifying novels as either realist or experimental, this study has therefore developed a more inclusive approach to narrative form by making the forms Levine identifies in her study *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* fruitful for literary analysis in their sociopolitical context. The emergence of these forms in recent Indian fiction has been traced in close readings of selected texts, showing the following: the novels' formal arrangements point to the fact that human perception is always limited and subjective, and reflect upon the construction of various realities in Indian society accordingly. Since India has one of the most diverse societies in the world in ethnic, religious and social terms, inventive approaches to narrative form help construct, and reflect upon, various realities, which more conventional storytelling techniques would not afford to the same extent.

The inventive approaches to narrative form in recent Indian fiction are hence related to the fact that there is, in contrast to nineteenth-century realist authorial narration, which takes the viewpoint of a middle-class subject for granted, no vanishing point of perspectives everyone, or at least a considerable majority, in India could agree with. The case of Kashmir and Hindu-Muslim tensions in general, which Khair, Tyrewala, Jha and Arundhati Roy have addressed in their novels, are only some of numerous issues in Indian society that point to the impossibility of identifying universal viewpoints that could be presented as such in fiction. The high degree of diversity found in Indian society inevitably leads to injustices, marginalisation and exclusion, processes that are closely connected to matters of power. As Gore points out in this respect, “[d]iversity poses problems to societies in two ways. First, differences imply a commitment of different groups to different styles of living and to different value frameworks and questions often arise about which lifestyle should prevail. Besides, diversity has also a way of giving rise to disparities, disparate access to opportunities and an unequal share in the power structure of society” (224). The pluralisation of forms observable in recent Indian fiction, which contributes to the constitution of multiple realities, may hence be understood as a reflection of the circumstance that there is, generally speaking, no universal perspective everyone in India could agree with, and therefore also as a fight against prevailing power structures in Indian

society. Even though there might be homogenising trends, as Mio and Dasgupta have pointed out, clear hierarchical social structures prevail in India up to this day. As Jacobsen notes in this respect,

[c]aste in India, although no longer functioning as a social system, has nonetheless not disappeared [...], and inequalities caused by caste seem to overlap with new forms of inequality. Poverty and uneven access to the resources of the state may become a threat to democracy, a large proportion of the world's poorest people live in India, which contrasts with the large annual economic growth India has achieved in the last decades as well as with the image of India as an emerging world power. (3)

Hence, the novels might reflect the urgency of more homogenising trends, the aim being to unite various voices into one whole, which does not seem to be possible at the moment. It is therefore necessary to first draw attention to the existing injustices and disparities among different groups in Indian society, meaning that the pluralisation of forms and voices in recent Indian fiction may hence not only be understood as a way of constructing various realities but also as a way of drawing attention to, and of undermining (in narrative terms), existing power structures that lead to marginalisation and exclusion. Nevertheless, Savyasachee Jha argues that “even as cultural differences remain – the division of Andhra Pradesh into Andhra and Telangana is a recent example – the tide has decisively shifted towards integration. The idea that Tamils would understand Hindi at some point would have been ludicrous a few generations ago” (n.p.). However, not all attempts to create a homogeneous society can be optimistically embraced, particularly with regard to the rise in Hindu nationalism and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent political decisions. As Laura Höflinger points out, “Modi's government has followed a clear Hindu-nationalist agenda [...]" (n.p.); for instance,

Modi's administration [...] rescinded the autonomy of India's only Muslim-majority state, Jammu and Kashmir, last August [2019]. Thousands of additional troops have been deployed to the Kashmir Valley, where the internet has been mostly shut down for more than six months, the longest blackout in the history of any democracy. Then, in December [2019], the Indian parliament adopted a new citizenship law allowing for refugees from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan who entered the country before 2014 to obtain citizenship more quickly. The law lists six religious communities in South Asia, with one exception: Muslims. (Höflinger n.p.)

Hence, radical homogenising trends may also be dangerous and cause even more severe tensions between specific groups in Indian society. A reflection upon the viewpoints of these various groups requires new narrative strategies, particularly a pluralisation of perspectives that includes all parties involved in a conflict and therefore empowers the voiceless, at least in the realm of fiction. This seems to be the main reason why the examples of recent Indian fiction

chosen for this study mostly abandon a dominant narrator position in favour of the perspectives of several narrators existing next to each other.

The novels analysed in this study are therefore characterised by several clashes of forms without being radically innovative or avant-garde, which makes it almost impossible to classify them as either realist or experimental, and hence creates the necessity for a more inclusive approach to narrative form that places emphasis on the limits and potentials of each specific formal arrangement. As shown in the theoretical part of this study, many scholars, such as Motte, Maack and Zerweck, have pointed out the difficulty of finding universal criteria for the two seemingly opposing categories. While there are some criteria that are commonly accepted, particularly with regard to the realist category, it seems to be almost impossible to find clear criteria for classifying a work of fiction as experimental. Additionally, even though the criteria Werner Wolf outlines in his extensive study *Ästhetische Illusion und Illusionsdurchbrechung in der Erzählkunst* may well apply to certain works of fiction, as shown in the case of Chetan Bhagat's *The Three Mistakes of My Life*, there are also several novels in the Indian and other contexts that defy such a clear classification (in terms of the creation of literary illusion) due to several clashes of forms. In fact, the great variety of formal arrangements up to twenty-first-century fiction has led to the formation of several subcategories that are all understood as experimental, as for instance shown in the *Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*. While such approaches of grouping and labelling literature that displays innovative formal features is perfectly acceptable, it would be wrong to underestimate the advantages of more inclusive approaches that do not rely on the opposition of realist and experimental in the first place. The assumption that novels do therefore not have one specific form but are made up of a variety of clashing or harmonising forms facilitates an inclusive approach that does not rely on this problematic distinction as it draws particular attention to the limits and potentials specific formal arrangements may have. As Fludernik has pointed out in *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology*, experientiality is an important criterion for literary works in general and does not necessarily require a linear plotline or other formal features that are understood as essential for realist works of fiction. Hence, Fludernik's study draws attention to the difficulties of classifying a work of fiction as realist, even though there seems to be a range of commonly accepted criteria. The fact that Caracciolo redefines Fludernik's concept of experientiality for an enactivist approach shifts more attention to recipients and their role in making sense of a work of fiction in accordance with their past experiences, memories of which may be triggered and enhanced by both structural features and the content. This empowerment of the reader must also be considered during the analysis of novels that display inventive formal features and

therefore potentially several clashes of forms that may trigger confusion or surprise and hence require readers' active participation in making sense of these clashes, which emphasises the fact that each formal arrangement in a work of fiction has its specific potentials; it may create illusionistic images of the world and hence draw readers into the text, confuse readers and encourage their critical thinking by employing various clashing forms, or combine both dimensions, which draws particular attention to the problematic distinction between realist and experimental. Additionally, formal arrangements that may, at first sight, confuse readers as they deviate from a conventional understanding of realist literature may, in fact, point to the constructedness of reality, characterised by phenomena such as coincidences, simultaneity and non-linearity.

The novels analysed in this study in particular are mostly characterised by multiperspectivity, non-chronological and episodic plots, and multimodality, which conveys a sense of fragmentation to the reader. The forms Levine identifies in her study are effective tools for making sense of the interaction of formal features that deviate from conventional storytelling techniques such as linear plotlines and the employment of one, potentially omniscient, narrator who is able to guide the reader and to create closure. The application of Levine's forms to literature also draws attention to the fact that specific formal arrangements have specific potentials and hence take different approaches to the construction of realities. The pluralisation of forms observable in all of the novels chosen for this study is related to a reflection upon how human perception works in general, and to a specific way of perceiving Indian realities in particular. If the forms Levine identifies can be found everywhere and actively shape everyday experiences, they may be projected onto a narrative's formal level as well in an attempt to constitute various realities and reflect upon the way humans perceive their environments. As several scholars have pointed out, India has a highly diverse society in numerous respects, which is why Indian authors find themselves confronted with the pressure of finding new ways of reflecting upon the wide range of influences that characterise the lives of the multiple groups of people that form Indian society. Generally speaking, the sense of fragmentation that is conveyed by the complex Indian social set-up defies unity or wholeness and hence also requires new ways of representation in narrative terms. Additionally, the forms Levine identifies can be applied to both formal and social arrangements and therefore point out possible tensions between these two dimensions. Hence, the approach presented in this study makes it possible to pay equal attention to form and content, and to identify the affordances of specific formal arrangements without having to rely on the problematic distinction between realist and experimental.

One of the most important basic assumptions underlying this approach is that forms are flexible entities that may exist next to or within each other, compete for dominance, and change their appearance. As Levine points out in the context of **networks**, “[...] we can understand networks as distinct forms – as defined patterns of interconnection and exchange that organize social and aesthetic experience” (113). Additionally, “[...] network organization allows us to consider how many formal elements connect to create nations or cultures” (Levine 113). As shown in this study, a network, which indicates a horizontally arranged and loosely connected set of elements that may be extended endlessly, points to a pluralisation of voices and the attempt to focus equal attention on narrators or characters who may occupy different positions in the social hierarchy. Hence, this formal network structure may interact and compete with hierarchical structures that exist in social terms. As Levine also points out in this context, “[i]t is true that some networks can cross and even undermine the boundaries of containing shapes” (117). The interaction of narrative forms and specific social arrangements on the content level may thus become an important tool for social criticism, as particularly demonstrated by the novels examined in chapter 3.

Even though most of the novels chosen for this study are characterised by network structures, with “[...] the roots of the term imply[ing] interwoven strands moving in multiple directions rather than directed toward a single end” (Levine 113), dominant vertical arrangements in the sense of narrative **hierarchies** are also frequently found and forcefully broken down at a later point, thus also indicating social critique. As Levine also points out, hierarchies are inevitably linked to matters of power and may be the cause of unjust arrangements and inequality in society (cf. 82). In conventionally written, realist novels, a narrative hierarchy may be closely related to wholeness that is created by one homodiegetic or heterodiegetic narrator who is in charge of the narrative and guides the reader through the novel. Such narrative hierarchies may also be found during certain passages of the novels chosen for this study, before they are abandoned in favour of a network structure that suddenly undermines the seemingly superior position of the dominant narrator and introduces several other narrators or perspectives that are granted equal importance. As Levine also notes in this respect, “[i]n fact, as they collide with other hierarchies and an array of other forms in social situations, hierarchies often go awry or are rerouted, and they can activate surprising and sometimes even progressive effects” (85). Narrative hierarchies are also frequently established in the novels’ prologues, seemingly introducing dominant narrators whose superiority is then broken down or undermined in the main part of the narrative.

The pluralisation of forms further makes it necessary to pay attention to **rhythm** or the absence of it. As Levine argues in her study, rhythmic forms are considered natural but are also pervasive and often punishing or restrictive (cf. 49). A specific rhythm hence implies a sense of order and structure, or may put certain elements in opposition to each other. Additionally, a certain rhythm, for instance created by the pattern of recurring characters, may also convey a stronger sense of connectedness of individual characters or stories. In contrast, the absence of any discernible rhythm in the arrangement of forms may convey a sense of chaos and fragmentation, which may help to reflect upon the chaos in the mind of a (traumatised) character or the social divisions observable in Indian society.

Despite this narrative fragmentation, it may be possible to create a sense of **wholeness** and closure, as particularly indicated by the novels analysed in the last chapter of this study. As Levine points out, wholes are usually associated with unity or containment (cf. 24). However, she is mostly critical of this unifying understanding of wholes; with reference to narratives in particular, she argues that “[t]his implies that narratives hold their materials together in the same way as funerary urns, when in fact they are forms organized by their unfolding over time” (Levine 40). She therefore also poses the question whether it might be better “if we understood literary texts not as unified but as inevitably plural in their forms – bringing together multiple ordering principles, both social and literary, in ways that do not and cannot repress their differences” (Levine 40). This study has pointed out the advantages of such an understanding of literary texts as inevitably plural. In most of the novels chosen for this study, several small wholes or other forms exist next to or within each other, even if they may be held together by a larger whole or may finally create a sense of unity. Hence, there seems to be a clear shift towards pluralisation in narrative terms, at least in the Indian context. Additionally, this circumstance usually entails a shift from narrative to textual wholeness, and novels that leave several questions unanswered may also require the reader’s active participation in creating wholeness. In fact, a new sense of wholeness may be achieved by accepting that reality is not a linear and easily accessible entity that could be portrayed as such in fiction.

As it turns out, a pluralisation of forms inevitably leads to the abandonment of the idea that there are unified wholes in literary or social contexts. Levine’s study, which particularly considers forms and sociopolitical arrangements of the Western world, already embraces this idea, indicating that there may be an increasing shift from wholeness and a unifying understanding of existing social arrangements towards pluralisation and network structures, which have only recently attracted scholarly interest. As this study has shown, in the context of recent Indian literature in particular, network structures emerge as the most dominant ordering

principle, mainly in an attempt to break down existing social hierarchies, at least in the realm of fiction. But despite hierarchical social arrangements, which imply a sense of order, Indian society is highly diverse, an examination of which may be carried out by employing network structures, which might, at first sight, as Levine has pointed out, “seem altogether formless, perhaps even the antithesis of form” (112).

This may then also explain the circumstance that rhythm seems to lose its significance in many of the novels chosen for this study. In some cases, however, the elements that make up a network follow a certain pattern, meaning that they may point to specific links between the separate characters or stories and hence create a stronger sense of connectedness. Additionally, even though it is possible to identify wholes in recent Indian literature, they must rather be understood as restrictive, incomplete and preliminary forms than as unifying ones. In the context of recent Indian literature, it might therefore be more suitable to address the forms in reverse order from what Levine has introduced in her study, with the new order – network, hierarchy, rhythm, whole – showing that there is a clear shift from wholes to networks. Network structures are found in most of the novels analysed in this study as they either display a pluralisation of voices and perspectives, with various narrators existing next to each other, or a series of stories told by the same narrator, focusing on different characters in their individual environments. Hence, network structures turn out to be the most dominant ordering principle in these novels, which inevitably leads to the abandonment of a dominant hierarchy in favour of several narrative hierarchies that exist next to each other. Additionally, the separate elements that make up the network must appear in a certain order, raising questions about rhythm or the absence of it. This formal arrangement indicates an abandonment of the idea of narrative wholeness, even though some of the novels chosen for this study at least attempt to create wholeness in some way. However, most of the novels point to a clear shift from wholes to networks, which indicates the constitution of various realities. This is why the reverse order – network, hierarchy, rhythm, whole – appears to be more suitable in the context of recent Indian fiction in English.

Chapter 3 focused on novels that provide an overview of the Indian social set-up, with various different groups existing next to each other and potentially competing for dominance. Additionally, Khair’s *The Bus Stopped* is particularly interested in an analysis of how perception works, and the novel’s dominant network structure draws attention to the fact that each individual has a different way of perceiving reality and interpreting the world around them. The apparent narrative hierarchy that is established in the first part of this novel and comes to reflect upon prevailing social hierarchies in present-day India is broken down in the course of

the narrative, which turns out to be an important tool for social criticism. *A State of Freedom* even displays a stronger sense of social criticism, mainly depicting characters positioned at the very bottom of the social hierarchy whose stories are told in separate wholes. Just like *The Bus Stopped*, Mukherjee's novel displays a network structure that places equal emphasis on the different characters appearing in it, regardless of their social status. The same is the case in Tyrewala's *No God in Sight*, which offers an overview of contemporary Mumbai by giving a voice to individuals of various different social and religious groups in a network that creates a rhythm of recurring characters and hence also unusual connections. All of the novels analysed in this chapter display a pluralisation of voices, focusing attention on representatives of different groups in Indian society and giving a voice to individuals that are usually voiceless due to their position at the bottom of the social hierarchy. The way the forms are arranged in the novels actively shapes this overview of the Indian social set-up as well as the criticism of this very set-up.

Network structures hence turn out to be the predominant ordering principle in these three novels, meaning that each narrator establishes a new narrative hierarchy within their separate elements of the network. This also implies that there is usually no dominant narrative hierarchy within the networks, even though there might be exceptions as in the case of *A State of Freedom*, which creates a hierarchy between the homodiegetic and the heterodiegetic narrator appearing within the network. *The Bus Stopped* and *No God in Sight* display a specific rhythm in the way the elements of their networks are arranged as they employ recurring characters, which creates a specific sense of connectedness and often also randomness. As numerous representatives of various different social groups exist next to each other in all three novels, it finally seems to be impossible to create a sense of wholeness.

After this extensive reflection upon Indian social realities, the novels analysed in chapter 4 focus on the construction of the life stories of a few specific individuals, examining their relationships to other characters and their positions within the larger network of social, religious and political forces. Additionally, the novels analysed in this chapter have a stronger intention of portraying the connections between past, present and future events and their impact on the specific characters they focus on. The network of interviews employed in Thayil's *The Book of Chocolate Saints* draws attention to the fact that different people may perceive others in different ways and, as a result, also tell different stories about them. The novel therefore displays parallels to *The Bus Stopped* but also presents a fairly linear narrative, or whole, that focuses on the final years of its main protagonist. This combination of a network and a whole draws special attention to the limitations of a conventionally written biography that tells the life

story of an individual in a linear fashion and conveys the illusion of objectivity and completeness; instead, the novel's formal set-up demonstrates that several people shape the life of an individual simultaneously and tell their specific and subjective stories about them. Anuradha Roy's *Sleeping on Jupiter* has similar effects as it focuses on the life story of Nomi, who travels from Norway to her Indian home town to investigate her painful past. The novel's network structure also explores the protagonist's relationship to characters who happen to be in the same place at the same time. This network structure, which does not display any discernible rhythm, therefore also places special emphasis on simultaneity and further undermines the impression that the past, the present and the future are completely separate entities as Nomi is repeatedly haunted by painful childhood memories. Swarup's *Latitudes of Longing* displays a similarly strong interest in the connection of past, present and future events as it explores the lives of a few specific characters from the Indian subcontinent and adjacent countries over several decades following Indian independence. The novel's network, which creates a regular rhythm of recurring characters (like *No God in Sight*) and closely connects past, present and future events in the form of flashbacks and flashforwards, additionally supports the metaphysical dimension the novel's characters allude to repeatedly, particularly by conveying the impression that everything in the universe is connected in some way and that the future is predetermined.

As in chapter 3, network structures can also be found in all of the novels analysed in this fourth chapter. While *Sleeping on Jupiter* and *Latitudes of Longing* employ large networks that extend throughout the narratives, *The Book of Chocolate Saints* combines a network with a whole. However, the network structure with its various perspectives existing next to each other points to the limitations of wholes in narratives. The same goes for *Latitudes of Longing*, which, at first sight, also employs separate wholes that then turn out to be part of a larger network. Additionally, even though *Latitudes of Longing* and *The Book of Chocolate Saints* feature omniscient narrators and hence establish clear narrative hierarchies (at least during certain stages of the narratives), the characters appearing in the networks' separate elements point to a breakdown of hierarchies when their individual stories are told. While *Sleeping on Jupiter* and *The Book of Chocolate Saints* do not display a specific rhythm in the way the elements of their networks are arranged, *Latitudes of Longing* creates a stronger sense of connectedness by employing the technique of recurring characters. Nevertheless, it does not suggest that it is possible to create wholeness in narrative or social terms (even though it alludes to a sense of metaphysical wholeness), just like the other two novels of this chapter.

After this exploration of the position of specific characters within the larger network of outer forces, the novels analysed in chapter 5 focus on the psychological impact of such forces on the individual. Additionally, even though all of the novels of this chapter employ first-person narrators and hence establish clear narrative hierarchies from the outset, there are also attempts to include the voices of other characters that are closely related to the protagonists. This arrangement therefore also lays bare the limitations of individual perspectives, as is the case in most of the novels chosen for this study. Hence, although the novels analysed in chapter 5 are the most introspective ones due to their first-person narrators, they do not neglect the reasons for the characters' psychological issues and may also include the perspectives of other closely related characters, even if the narrators may only imagine these (opposing) perspectives. The narrator of Jha's *The Blue Bedspread*, who tries to cope with the loss of his beloved sister and his painful childhood memories characterised by domestic violence, incest and abuse, continually tries to imagine the perspectives of his family members, gradually blurring the lines between truth and imagination. This circumstance leads to a reconsideration of the narrative hierarchy and the establishment of a network of separate stories and snippets of memories that do not follow any discernible rhythm, therefore laying bare the chaos in the protagonist's mind and reflecting upon his sense of inner fragmentation. In a similar fashion, the first-person narrator of Khair's *Night of Happiness* imagines stories surrounding his Muslim employee, laying bare the prejudices he holds against him and therefore also alluding to religious tensions within Indian society. He manages to maintain the narrative hierarchy he has established and even starts pretending to be an omniscient narrator when he embellishes Ahmed's story with details based on his vivid imagination, gradually blurring the line of Ahmed's whole within the whole of the manuscript. The first-person narrator of Jha's *Fireproof* also establishes a clear narrative hierarchy from the outset and gradually assembles his whole in a fairly linear fashion. However, as his whole gets interrupted by various elements that form their own network of oppositional voices, the alleged narrative hierarchy begins to fall apart despite Jay's attempts to maintain it, laying bare the mindset of a ruthless murderer involved in the Gujarat riots.

Unlike *Night of Happiness*, *The Blue Bedspread* and *Fireproof* are mostly characterised by network structures and hence several stories and/or perspectives existing next to each other, although the narrator of *The Blue Bedspread* only seems to imagine these perspectives. Hence, even though both novels employ one dominant narrator and thus establish a clear narrative hierarchy, the network structures are clearly visible. Additionally, while *The Blue Bedspread* is characterised by the absence of rhythm, which reflects the chaos in the protagonist's mind, the elements of the network that keep interrupting Jay's narrative create a specific rhythm that

gradually makes it clear that the oppositional voices are more powerful than he is. Hence, it is not possible for him to convey a sense of wholeness, which also applies to the narrator of *The Blue Bedspread*. In addition, even though *Night of Happiness* is the only novel chosen for this study that does not display network structures of any kind, the wholes created by the protagonist skillfully reveal the limitations of such a formal arrangement that does not grant the subject of the narration a voice himself and hence indicate that a reflection upon various realities may require different narrative strategies.

The novels analysed in chapter 6 also explore the psychological and social impact of real-life massacres and incidents on their victims, before creating a sense of wholeness and closure despite various layers of narrative fragmentation. The two wholes of Jha's *The City and the Sea* draw attention to both the outer forces that divide (female) victims and (male) perpetrators in the city of Delhi and a rape victim's sense of inner fragmentation. When the elements of the two separate wholes, whose regular rhythm is only once broken by December's whole, flow into each other and thus create a sense of closure, the implication is that even though the dead cannot be saved anymore and the sense of wholeness can only be brought about by a blanking out of reality, there is hope for less fragmentation in the future if social changes start taking place right now, not only in India but also in the rest of the world. Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is similarly interested in an exploration of such layers of inner and outer fragmentation and has an extended focus on the most important political, social and religious incidents in twenty-first-century India so far. The novel's various elements, which are arranged in a horizontal network, are held together by an obtrusive omniscient narrator who is close to the empirical author and manages to create a sense of wholeness towards the end of the novel despite its chaotic arrangement of forms, which do not follow any specific pattern or rhythm. Additionally, the fact that the novel's large network repeatedly opens up smaller networks also points to the circumstance that, as indicated in most of the other novels as well, it is never possible to see 'everything,' even though this seems to be the narrator's intention. Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess* also employs a narrator who is close to the empirical author and repeatedly reflects on her storytelling techniques in a whole that extends throughout the novel and forms the basis for the establishment of an alternative truth surrounding the Kilvenmani massacre of untouchable peasants. This narrator-novelist deliberately undermines the narrative hierarchy Naidu has established in the prologue and initiates a network that gradually shifts power to the voiceless victims of the massacre. Despite the various layers of narrative fragmentation and the absence of any discernible rhythm, the novel finally creates a sense of closure by converting this network of voices into a powerful whole and by encouraging

the reader to keep up the newly-established counter-discourse in favour of the victims of the massacre.

Even though all of the novels chosen for this chapter finally manage to create a sense of wholeness and closure, they are characterised by network structures as well, providing the perspectives of various different characters that often oppose each other. Hence, there is no dominant narrative hierarchy throughout the novels, even though *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* and *The Gypsy Goddess* also employ overt and at times obtrusive narrators. However, the network structures finally lead to a breakdown of hierarchies and dominant viewpoints, particularly as the networks are capable of opening up even smaller networks that exist within them. Additionally, *The Gypsy Goddess* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* in particular do not create any specific rhythm or pattern in the way the elements of the networks are arranged, reflecting both Indian society's diversity and the social divisions that keep fragmenting it. Even though *The City and the Sea* draws attention to similar issues, it creates a regular rhythm of the alternating city and sea chapters. However, the divisions of Indian society become particularly clear when this regular rhythm is broken at one point during the narrative. Additionally, even though all of the novels analysed in this chapter manage to create some sort of closure, narrative fragmentation and network structures mostly overshadow this sense of wholeness that is finally created.

The network structures (focusing on the stories of several different characters and their individual perspectives) discernible in almost all of the novels chosen for this study may thus turn out to be a powerful tool for social criticism when they are opposed to social hierarchies and give a voice to the voiceless members at the bottom of the hierarchy. Additionally, network structures, which often convey an impression of endlessness, may draw attention to the fact that it is never possible to see 'everything' or to answer all open questions about an event, a misleading conception conveyed by many conventionally written novels that present a linear plotline and achieve closure. The inventive formal arrangements of the novels analysed in this study therefore draw attention to the limits of human perception and reflect upon how specific individuals perceive reality, characterised by phenomena such as coincidences, simultaneity and non-linearity. Additionally, such techniques reflect upon the various realities of Indian society in particular, characterised by diversity and various layers of fragmentation, which defy a sense of wholeness.

It must be noted that this study primarily offers a general analysis of the main aspects of the chosen novels and that certain topics could be explored in more detail, for instance in terms of gender or space. In fact, the approach to narrative form offered in this study may be

integrated into any kind of analysis of fiction as it brings narrative and social forms together and facilitates an exploration of their interaction. In the Indian context in particular, the arrangement of the novels' forms contributes to the construction of various different realities and, for instance, reflects upon the impact of social hierarchies on specific groups and individuals. As this study is limited to an analysis of recent Indian fiction written in English, this assumption could also be explored with regard to literature published in other countries and contexts. As the *Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* and Knepper and Deckard's introduction to the special volume on *Radical World Literature* indicate, a variety of innovative literature is published all over the world. Instead of sticking to the label 'experimental,' a term the authors of the *Routledge Companion* consider problematic themselves, an analysis of forms as carried out in this study has several advantages. The approach is more inclusive and the concepts can be applied to any type of narrative, no matter whether it would, according to conventional criteria, fall into the category of realist or experimental literature. This does not mean that terms such as multimodality lose their significance but that all elements that have the potential to shape narratives in some way, be it in terms of form or content, can be equally considered and compared to each other within one specific scheme that offers a clear terminology but remains flexible and may hence cover a wide range of textual and social phenomena. In fact, an analysis of forms as carried out in this study brings text and context together and offers new possibilities for an exploration of the interaction of these two dimensions, which must be accorded equal importance. A comparison of recent Indian English fiction and fiction from other countries may additionally answer the question to what extent the most dominant formal arrangements identified in the novels chosen for this study may be a specifically Indian phenomenon. Additionally, an analysis of a wider range of novels, potentially from other cultural and social contexts, would allow for a reinterpretation of the current forms or the identification of further forms, which would extend the spectrum offered by Levine's forms and this study.



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