Writing from the Margins: Muslim Authors in Hindi and "Minor Literature"

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Declaration for SOAS PhD thesis

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Abstract

This thesis examines the writings of four authors from Muslim backgrounds writing in Hindi from the 1980s to the 2010s. Since minorities are usually the first victims of changes in social relations and are traditionally scapegoated, I approach their writings to gain a better understanding of reactions to their perceptions on minoritization in post-independence India, particularly in the context of the rise of the form of Hindu-based nationalism known as Hindutva. This thesis adopts the critical perspective on "Minor Literature" put forward by Deleuze and Guattari with regard to Franz Kafka, seeking to extend it and test it in relation to the writings of other "national minorities" that share the similar characteristic of being members of a minority community writing in the majority's language. The authors examined here add a nuanced understanding of the different histories of various Muslim communities in north India, showing that there is no monolithic Indian Muslim identity and that specific local histories are at least as important as national ones. Moreover, through close readings of their novels and short stories this thesis shows that the Hindi–Urdu debate continues to be relevant and that Muslim authors occupy a position from which they can challenge popular assumptions regarding the equation of Hindi with Hindu.

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This thesis was submitted working under a strict (but not entirely precise) time frame of my partner Nina's due date. I hope everything goes smoothly. And Nina, the following pages are my excuse for not writing enough love letters.

A modified version of Chapter Four has been translated into Hindi and published by Anusandhan Research Journal (January-March 2018) in a special issue celebrating Nasira Sharma's winning of the Sahitya Akademi award for Hindi.

A Note on Translation and Transliteration

All the translations from Hindi are my own unless otherwise stated. All transliterations have been done following R.S. McGregor's scheme in *The Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary*. Words that have become part of the English language such as *zamindar* and *marsiya,* have been written without diacritical marks. I do not transliterate the names of persons and places.

Introduction

In his 1999 essay "Can a Muslim Be an Indian?", Gyanendra Pandey noted:

> [N]ations are established by constructing a core or mainstream—the essential, natural, soul of the nation [...] minorities are constituted along with the nation—for they are the means of constituting national majorities or mainstreams. (608)

Nations and their legal and institutional embodiment in the nation state are among the strongest forces in our era. Although nation states claim to be inclusive, scholars from Benedict Anderson to Aamir Mufti have shown that they constitute an "us" that is opposed to "them." Minorities often straddle the line between the two, belonging to the nation state but not necessarily to the nation of the majority. Minorities often complicate the national narrative since they inject a minor perspective in public discourse which does not necessarily fit dominant conceptions of the state. Moreover, their minor identity makes their contributions to different conceptualizations of the nation suspect. By both belonging and being outsiders at the same time, national minorities challenge the naturalized, or constructed core of the nation state. Timothy Brennan cogently states that: "Nations, then, are imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature plays a decisive role" (49).[1] Hindi literature since partition has largely excluded Muslims and they very rarely, if at all, appear as protagonists in fiction written by non-Muslims. This simple act of exclusion by individual authors creates the situation in which Muslims have no part in the national narrative, the accumulation of stories that make and maintain the "imaginary construct" of the nation.

[1] In Bhabha ed.

Since the partition of India and Pakistan at independence in 1947, the position of Muslims as the largest religious minority in India has been central to the project of a secular state identity ostensibly predicated on the protection of religious minorities.[2] Language was a central tool through which nationalists sought to create a united Indian nation already before independence.[3] Nation states are often constituted around, and promote, a national language, and despite its great linguistic diversity and the continuing importance of English, in India's case Hindi was meant to bear this honor and burden.[4] The competition and increasing polarization between Hindi as "the language of the Hindus" and Urdu as "the language of the Muslims" in the period leading up to independence was exacerbated by the perception that Urdu had no place in independent India because of its role in the Pakistan movement and partition and the fact that it had become the national language of Pakistan.

Against this backdrop, this thesis focuses on the generation of Muslim authors who came of age in post-independence India and who chose to write in Hindi. More particularly, it explores their representations of Muslim life and society between 1984 and 2011. These writings create the potential for a critical examination of the "fuzzy edges" of national identity (Pandey 608). They help us understand minority as a general phenomenon pertaining to the nation state, but also the specific contours of the Indian Muslim experience over the last few decades. First and foremost, Muslim writers in Hindi make visible the experiences of Indian Muslims, which are otherwise rendered largely invisible in contemporary Hindi literature. Second, by refusing to be compartmentalized into a fixed and "othered" identity, they offer resistance while claiming equal rights to Indian identity and to the Hindi language. Third, they expose the

[2] See, for example Bajpai (2000, 2010), Gayer and Jaffrelot, Hasan (1996), Mufti.

[3] See Dalmia, Rai, Orsini (2002).

[4] Chiriyankandath and Rai discuss the ways in which the Indian constitution was carefully worded in order to accommodate Hindi as a national language.

pressures of being a minority, pressures that are often expressed as internalized physical or mental ailments. Fourth, they propose alternative conceptions and genealogies of identity based on religious or local histories. Finally, they show the particularity and locatedness of the Muslim experience instead of the generalized identity of the mainstream othering discourse; in many of their narratives the forces of local history are as powerful as those of national history. In short, in this thesis I argue that these writers subvert perceptions of Muslims as the "other" by providing a complex viewpoint that does not lend itself to easy categorization. More generally, since Hindi is India's purported national language, the voices of Muslims writing in Hindi pose a number of challenges to the idea that Hindi is connected exclusively to Hindus, thus inserting a minority and critical perspective into Hindi.

This thesis centers on four authors writing in Hindi who represent the first generation to have grown up in independent India—Asghar Wajahat (b. 1946), Nasira Sharma (b. 1948), Manzoor Ahtesham (b. 1948) and Abdul Bismillah (b. 1949). In order to properly understand their writings, I contend that three independent but interrelated theoretical frames are required. The first and overarching frame is provided by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of Minor Literature, that is, literature created by members of a minority in the language of the majority (16).[5] Within the broad outlines of this theory, an understanding of the legal framework and historical and political history of Muslims as a minority in India is necessary. I am guided here by Aamir Mufti's argument that Indian nationalism, secular as well as religious, entailed the minoritization of Muslims, just as European conceptions of nationalism required the minoritization of Jews even within a secular framework. Mufti's argument about the minoritization of Muslims even within secular Indian

[5] All mentiones of Deleuze and Guattari refer to *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (1975) unless stated otherwise.

nationalism provides my second analytical frame. The third theoretical approach I employ is Fredric Jameson's notion of the "political unconscious" in his eponymous book *The Political Unconscious* (1981). This serves as my primary methodology for connecting the surface of the texts, their narrative structure and system of characters, with the deeper political and historical forces and pressures at work.

1 The Nation State and its Minorities

> This book is about the crisis of modern secularism […] it is in part an attempt to formulate some ways of thinking about the meaning of the crisis of Muslim identity in modern India […] my basic premise is that the crisis of Muslim identity must be understood in terms of the problematic of secularization and minority in post-Enlightenment culture as a whole and therefore cannot be understood in isolation from the history of the so-called Jewish Question in modern Europe. (2)
>
> Aamir Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony*

Aamir Mufti's *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture* (2007) traces the dissemination of the idea of a national community and its exclusionary imperative from Europe to India. Mufti focuses on the process of minoritization—that is, the specific production of a minority—of Indian Muslims in colonial India. He models this process on the minoritization of Jews in Europe, showing how, as a result of the Enlightenment and the rise of the nation state and a secular identity, European Jews were cast as the "other", this "othering" having been a fundamental part of the European construction of the nation and nation state.[6] Mufti then shows

[6] "[Nationalism's] distinguishing mark historically has been precisely that it makes large numbers of people eminently unsettled. More simply put, whenever a population is minoritized—a process inherent in the nationalization of peoples and cultural practices—it is also rendered potentially movable" (*Enlightenment in the Colony,* 13).

how Indian conceptions of the nation and the nation state in the colonial period were influenced by European ones, one consequence of which was that, even in the secular model, Indian Muslims were cast in the role of a minority, paralleling the position of the Jews in Europe. Mufti's main line of argument is that creating a national consciousness in India entailed the production of Muslims as the "other". Namely, that the secular nation's discourse of equality ends up inscribing the idea of a minority.

Mufti demonstrates this process through his reading of Jawaharlal Nehru's *The Discovery of India* (1946), showing that even Nehru "others" Muslims as a community that is different and in greater need of development. Nehru writes:

> There has been a difference of a generation or more in the development of the Hindu and Moslem middle classes, and the difference continues to show itself in many directions, political economic, and other. It is this lag which produces a psychology of fear among the Moslems. (Cited in Mufti, 135)

The problem is not that Nehru's secularism is hypocritical or deficient, but that secularism itself entails the creation of an "other."[7] Nehru seems to be claiming that Muslims are underdeveloped and thus perhaps not yet ready for modern forms of citizenship.

An important aspect that, in my opinion, Mufti does not stress sufficiently is the way in which the spread and subsequent dominance of nation state structures in Europe changed the way in which Jews were "othered" or minoritized. Their status changed from a religious minority to a *national* minority once the religious discourse gave way to the rhetoric of national identity and the nation state. In other words, the religious difference became

[7] For more scholarship on Indian secularism, see Bhargava (1998b), Bilgrami, Sangari.

less important as they became national minorities within each nation state. Their difference was framed not in terms of their religious practices but on the basis that they did not belong to the nations they were living in, whose identity was intrinsically defined in both religious and cultural terms. Furthermore, the geographical diffusion of Jews allowed them to be cast as a transnational and therefore suspect community.

This point is crucial. The texts analyzed in this thesis demonstrate that it is the Muslim characters' identity as a *national* minority that is problematic. These characters are marginalized not because of any problem with Islam as a religion per se, at least in the context of secular nationalism, but because they represent a large and relatively influential minority, a fact that potentially compromises their loyalty to the Indian nation. Their personal religiosity or affiliation has no effect on how they are perceived. Muslim identity in India threatens both the secular and Hindu conceptions of the nation state, since it is not Hindu and also presents different modes of national belonging.[8] It is their position as a religious minority translated into national minority that makes Muslims in India a threat. In other words, the nation state supersedes religion, and religious identity becomes problematic not because of the specific religion involved, but because it is different from the dominant, majority religion and because of the potential for the minority to identify as a community with groups across the border that are external to the nation. I argue that, while religious pluralism is more the norm than the exception in many nation states, this plurality is only accommodated as long as the minority religion or religious group is not seen as a threat to the dominant religion or the majority. Furthermore, in the specific case of India the position of racial outcastes is

[8] For a debate about the way the Indian state was imagined vis-à-vis its Muslim inhabitants, see, for example, Bhargava (2000), who discusses both the emotional power of ideas and how the lack of political imagination led to partition. Elsewhere (Bhargava 1990), he tries to find ways to reconcile the conflicting demands of Hindus and Muslims as separate social groups within the framework of India as a secular nation state.

already occupied by the Dalits. This strengthens the "othering" of Muslims as aliens purely on the grounds of their threat to the cohesion of the Indian nation, which is implicitly and explicitly linked to Hinduism and other "autochthonous" traditions. As Partha Chatterjee reminds us, "[t]his debate is not merely academic; it has aroused some of the most violent passions in the country's political life" (15).

M.S. Golwalkar, the second leader of the RSS, perhaps the main Hindutva organization, wrote admiringly of Germany's "purging the country of Semitic races." He goes on to state: "how well-nigh impossible it is for races and cultures, having differences going to the root, to be assimilated into one united whole, a good lesson for us in Hindustan to learn and profit by" (Cited in Jaffrelot 2007, 112).[9] Golwalkar's admiration is of course also connected to Hindutva pride in the adoption of the term Aryan by Nazi ideology.[10]

In order to counter the racist strains in Hindu nationalism, the Indian nation state created legal frameworks that are supposed to ensure equality before the law, religious affiliation notwithstanding. The general legal status of Muslims in India is defined by their Indian citizenship because the Indian constitution applies to all its citizens. Additionally, and importantly for the discussion here, the legal status of Muslims is determined by their minority status because there exists a constitutional safeguard for minorities in India which guarantees "the right to be governed by religiously-defined family laws" (Randeria, 284).[11] Today, these rights are often viewed as an expression of

[9] See the passage in Abdul Bismillah's *Apavitra ākhyān* in which a Hindu man speaks admiringly of Hitler "cleaning" Europe of its Jews (P223 in this thesis). Admittedly, Golwalkar wrote in 1939, before the holocaust, but the lasting admiration towards the Nazi ideology of Aryan supremacy and racial purity shows its attraction for Hindutva circles.

[10] For more, see Trautmann ed., *The Aryan Debate* especially the essay by Romila Thapar pp. 106-128.

[11] Hindu personal law applies to all Hindus, Jains, Buddhists and Sikhs; see Yildrim (913).

Indian secularism, that is, a form of state-sponsored religious pluralism which has "a protective quality" for India's minorities (Yildrim, 918).

These family laws are rooted in highly orthodox religious textual laws and govern issues of marriage, divorce, inheritance and adoption (Yildrim, 908). Their inclusion in the constitution is based on an understanding of India as a secular republic that guarantees religious freedom to all its citizens, as stated in Articles 25-30 of the Indian constitution. The family laws in the Indian constitution are nonetheless a colonial legacy.[12] It was the British who started the secularization of the law on the one hand while creating religion-based policies for reasons of governance and community civil codes on the other.[13] By structuring parts of the legal system on the basis of religious differences, the colonial state not only protected communal differences but effectively created, fixed and institutionalized them. This strategy can be interpreted as part of the colonial governance strategy of "divide and rule", that is, of codifying, counting and administering the colonized subjects. Thus, with the institutionalization of family laws, the colonial rulers also participated in the process of essentializing communal collectivities and forming exclusivist religious identities that would not allow for "multiple belongings and diffuse identities" (Randeria, 297). As Nicholas Dirks (1992) also argued, and as Randeria reminds us:

> [D]espite its rhetoric of universalising modernity, colonial governance was concerned with the management and often even the production of difference. [i.e. separate electorates for different religions] […] Whereas the ideology of colonialism pointed towards secular modern rights leading to free citizenship and eventually nationhood, its reality dealt with not only the essentialisation of racial inequality but also the institutionalisation of an elaborate grammar of cultural diversity through bureaucratic and administrative practice. (295)

[12] See N. Chatterjee.

[13] For more on this debate, see Bhambhri (22-23), N. Chatterjee.

While the laws defending minority communities ostensibly protect them from majoritarian domination, they also created the very idea of distinct communities and inscribed difference in them that keeps reinforcing a process of "othering." Most of the authors discussed in this thesis resist being "othered" and marginalized, though they do not challenge the definition of Hindu or Muslim. However, *Pārijāt* by Nasira Sharma, discussed in Chapter Four, deals exactly with "multiple belongings and diffuse identities" trying to recuperate a pre-colonial Ganga-Jamuni identity which blends Hindu and Shia practices.[14]

The institutionalization of religion-based communal laws posed a dilemma for the makers of the Indian constitution from the beginning. The religion-based and community-specific family laws instituted by the modernist framers of the Indian constitution such as Nehru and Ambedkar stood in stark contrast to how they envisaged the Indian constitution, namely as a constitution modeled on the understanding of secularism in Western liberal democracies and with a uniform civil code. However, after a partition which happened along religious lines, the authors of the constitution had to signal to the different (religious) communities in post-colonial India that "the new independent nation would respect and protect" their communal identities (Yildrim, 913).[15] Kaviraj writes in this regard:

> [S]ince they [the authors of the constitution] were practical politicians, they decided to acknowledge two types of constraints arising out of initial circumstances, tempering their extreme constructivism. The constraints emerged from the immense uncertainty faced by Muslims who decided to remain in India after the partition riots and the need to reassure them that the constitution would protect their cultural identity. This conjunctural requirement to reassure Muslim minorities forced the

[14] Ganga-Jamuni culture is a term used to describe the mixed Hindu-Muslim culture of north India in the centuries leading up to Partition, as expressed in music, food, public rituals, sociability, and so on.

[15] For more on measures to protect minorities, see Kaviraj, Khan, Khilnani, Varshney (2009).

> framers of the constitution to improvise and to institute rights that individuals could enjoy only by virtue of their membership in communities. (159)

These measures were considered temporary in nature, to be replaced eventually by legal homogeneity and the creation of secular citizenship. As Bajpai states, the ideal of a secular nationalism in the sense of Western liberal democracies is not only framed in the Directive Principles of the constitution, but is also expressed "in the popular slogan 'irrespective of caste, creed, race or community'" (2010, 184). Bajpai further notes that this ideal was "a polity in which ascriptive affiliations of any kind would become irrelevant in the political domain" (2010, 184). Yet what was initially considered a temporary solution for a transitional phase has remained an integral and distinct element of the Indian constitution until today, and it continues to define the legal position of Muslims in India. Although benign in its original intent, this legal difference has contributed to the "othering" of Muslims in other domains and has also stoked resentment based on what is perceived to be a "pandering to religious interests," as the phrase often goes.

We receive a clearer picture of the legal position of Muslims in India by contrasting it to the rights granted to other segments of the population who have been given a special legal and constitutional position, such as the so-called Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes or the Other Backward Classes. Legally these groups are not considered minorities, and thus they fall outside the purview of the minority rights mentioned above. However, the constitution grants them a variety of protective measures and benefits since they are considered socio-economically and educationally disadvantaged segments of society. These protective measures and benefits are meant to enable them to

overcome their underprivileged social status,[16] but they are not extended to minority groups. This means that a person of Muslim background who also belongs to a Scheduled Caste is not entitled to receive them.[17] These rights include reservations in political representation, institutions of higher education and posts in the public sector.[18]

India's constitutional and legal framework therefore clearly differentiates between minority groups and other disadvantaged segments of the society.[19] As Bajpai points out, the exclusion of religious minorities from the group-preference provision in the Indian constitution marks "a shift from the manner in which communal safeguards have been envisioned and defended in colonial policy" (1837). She presents an illuminating analysis of the debate on minorities in the Constituent Assembly during the crafting of the constitution and shows that one of the main arguments for excluding religious minorities from political safeguards was that they were perceived to be culturally distinct but not disadvantaged in socio-economic terms—which was to some extent true at the time.[20] Moreover, religious difference was perceived as a basis for division and consequently as a threat. As Bajpai notes, "If conflicts about religious doctrines were played out in the arena of the state, the state would be torn apart.

[16] As Bajpai puts it, they were created "for the specific purpose of ameliorating the social and economic disabilities of backward sections" (2000, 1837).

[17] The Scheduled Caste category is limited by religion to Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists, which are administratively considered as belonging to the Hindu fold; therefore they do not constitute a minority community. This has been a much-contested issue because many Muslim communities belong to the same marginalized groups but do not enjoy protection as Scheduled Castes; see Waughray (348).

[18] For a more detailed description, see Waughray (341).

[19] "In 1992 a statutory body, the National Commission for Minorities (NCM), was established to ensure the development of minorities—defined by the National Commission for Minorities Act 1992 (NCMA) as 'a community notified as such by the Central government'—and to safeguard their rights. Five communities have been centrally notified as minorities—Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists and Zoroastrians (Parsis)" (Waughray, 340).

[20] "The backwardness of a group was regarded as creating legitimate grounds for group-preference provisions whereas perceived need to preserve a distinct cultural identity was not" (Bajpai 2000, 1837).

Therefore the state, in order to save itself and achieve the consolidation of the nation, had to steer clear of matters concerning religion—which was to be restricted to the domain of the private practices of citizens" (2000, 1838). A third argument, embraced by Nehru among others, was that religion and ascriptive affiliations in general were vestiges of a pre-modern time (2000, 1838). In both cases, political safeguards for disadvantaged sections aimed at eradicating differences and communal rights have produced the opposite effect by creating and reinforcing the very idea of the difference. This, in turn, has had an enduring effect on the relationship between minority and majority communities.

Since 1976, that is since the enactment of the Forty-second Amendment Act of the Constitution under the reign of Indira Gandhi, the preamble of the Indian constitution contains the term "secular" to describe the nature of the Republic of India, in Pal's words: " to emphasize that no particular religion in the state will receive any state patronage whatsoever and no citizen in the state will have any preferential treatment or will be discriminated against simply on the grounds that he or she professes a particular form of religion" (Pal, 24).

It can be argued that the secular character manifests first and foremost in the absence of a state religion, which principally means that the state cannot promote, support or favor a single religion over another one – a unique feature of the Indian nation state compared to its South Asian neighbors Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The Indian constitution does not contain an explicit interdiction of a state religion, however several of its provisions assure this point through a strict separation of religion and the state. For example article 27 prohibits the collection of taxes for the protection or maintenance of a particular religion, article 28 prohibits the provision of religious education in public educational institutions and articles 14, 15, and 16 demand legal equality, irrespective of religious affiliation (see Das, 35).

Moreover, the secular character of the Indian constitution finds expression in the constitutional ideal of freedom of religion for the individual

and for religious bodies. The freedom of religion finds expression in the preamble which speaks of “liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship” (The Constitution of India, 1). Furthermore, it is anchored in article 25 (1) of the fundamental rights, the constitutional safeguards for minorities: “Subject to public order, morality and health and to the other provisions of this part, all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practise and propagate religion“ (The Constitution of India, 9).

If we take secularism as a concept that defines the relationship between the Indian state and religion, the absence of a state religion and the guarantee of religious freedom invites the conclusion that in the Indian case the nature of the relationship is parity: The Indian constitution demands that the state treat the different religions and religious communities with equal respect. It takes a neutral stance towards the different religions and religious communities, without giving precedence to one over others. It shows a commitment to equal citizenship and is obliged to protect its religious minorities. This has its roots in the distinct history of partition and the creation of the Indian nation state. India's struggle for independence was marked from the very beginning by the understanding that India would be a country consisting of numerous minorities and heterogeneous social groups. The heart of the discussions surrounding independent rule was how to create a structure that would supplant British colonialism and ensure equal rights for all communities: By creating India along secular lines, Nehru and other Congress leaders, tried to create an apparatus that would check any predisposition “to disfavor smaller religious groups [and] to deter the persecution of religious minorities" (Bhargava 1998a: 1). Nehru wrote regarding the principle of *sarva dharma samabhava* in 1961:

> We talk about a secular state in India. It is perhaps not very easy even to find a good word in Hindi for 'secular.' Some people think it means something opposed to religion. That obviously is not correct [...] It is a

> state which honors all faiths equally and gives them equal opportunities. (Cited in Pantham 1997: 535).

In order to protect its religious minorities, India took on a secular state identity. Secularism as equality irrespective of religious affiliation appeared as a solution for communal heterogeneity. However, the notion of secularism in the Indian case is complex. While the absence of a state religion and the granting of freedom of religion are common aspects of a secular state, the Indian model of secularism shows a peculiarity: The constitution attributes far-reaching competences to the state to interfere in the religious domain which stands in stark contrast to fundamental principles of secularism in the West. First, the state actively supports religious institutions by providing a separate legal system for Hindus and Muslims.[21] As a means to protect religious minorities the state has not enforced a uniform civil code, but grants religious personal laws to deal with issues such as marriage, dowry, dissolution of marriage, inheritance, adoption and maintenance. Second, the Indian state controls and supervises affairs of Hindu religious institutions, particularly the financial administration of Hindu temples to prevent mismanagement of religious endowment and religious institutions – an interference which is, as Smith states, "justified by pointing to the need for reforms in financial administration which the state alone is equipped to bring about." (Smith, 496) And third, the state regulates certain religious practices which are discriminatory in nature, because, as Beaglehole puts it, of its "desire to promote social reform" (Beaglehole, 73). The constitution demands special support and privileges for low caste groups, such as positive discrimination in government employment and the right to enter temples for Dalits.[22]

[21] See further below where I discuss the legal situation of the Muslim minorities and legal pluralism in greater detail.

[22] For a more detailed description see Das 2004: 37-38.

With these, the constitution does not fully observe the defining principles for a secular state in the West which leads some scholars to argue that the term secular is not applicable to India.[23] However, we can define Indian secularism as aiming towards the ideal of communal impartiality and religious pluralism. Pantham captures the essence of the Indian system with the following formulation: "(…) the Western antonym of 'secular' is 'religious.' In India, by contrast, it is 'communal' that is the antonym of 'secular.'"(Pantham 1997: 525) As I stated above, in India secularism was conceived as a way to insure treatment of all communities equally which obviously lead to a different form of secularism than in western nations. Beaglehole states in this respect that "the principle of equal protection involves a closer relationship of religion and the state than is compatible with the traditional view of the secular state." (Beaglehole, 74) Though the Indian constitution is formally secular, this does not mean that religion does not play a central role.

Overall, Muslims constitute about 14 percent of the population in India.[24] However, in Uttar Pradesh, where three of the authors are from and where their narratives take place, the percentage rises to roughly 20 percent, and in Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh, where Manzoor Ahtesham is from, it is close to 30 percent. In fact, in many areas of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar Muslims constitute the majority of the population, and throughout north India they make up the largest religious minority. In all these areas Muslims were once the dominant elite, and several, though not all, of the authors discussed in this thesis come from this elite background. As a result, their experience of marginalization as a process is intensified. However, local experiences, as we shall see, differ significantly.

[23] A famous proponent of this view is Luthera (1964). His argument is based on a narrow definition of secularism as the strict separation between state and religion which the Indian constitution does not fulfill. For a different view see Smith 1963.

[24] All figures taken from the 2011 census, see Census of India Website (accessed 18/6/2018).

While the rise to prominence of Hindu nationalism, often referred to as Hindutva, has accentuated the difficult position of Muslims in India in recent decades, the novels of Manzoor Ahtesham, for example (Chapters One and Two), expose that the fault lines were laid down at the creation of the independent nation state and are thus not a product of the recent ascent of the Hindutva ideology to a position of power. The basic contradiction between the legal position of Muslims and society's everyday practices of minoritization and exclusion is an aspect of the inherent tension between minorities and the nation state. However, the increase in violent events targeting Muslims in the run up to and in the wake of the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya has generated a greater level of urgency in recent writings, as we shall see in the work of Asghar Wajahat (Chapter Three). The creative force that these tensions can create are laid out in a convincing way in Deleuze and Guattari's approach to Kafka's work. But before I turn to this approach, I shall briefly describe the language debate that has framed Hindi as both the language of Hindus and the national language-to-be.

2 Language Issues and the Hindi–Urdu Debate

> [W]hen a question arose in colonial India over the meaning of national language and culture, both Indian nationalists and their Muslim opponents agreed that it was the northern belt and its language complex that could provide the answer. But instead of producing one standardized version of this language, the process of nationalization in fact produced two. (Mufti, 142)

> Language is, in Weinreich's words, 'an essentially heterogeneous reality'. There is no mother tongue, only a power takeover by a dominant language within a political multiplicity. Language stabilizes around a parish, a bishopric, a capital. It forms a bulb. It evolves by subterranean stems and flows, along river valleys or train tracks; it spreads like a patch of oil. It is always possible to break a language down into internal structural elements, an undertaking not fundamentally different from a

> search for roots. There is always something genealogical about a tree. It is not a method for the people. A method of the rhizome type, on the contrary, can analyze language only by decentering it onto other dimensions and other registers. (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 8)

Deleuze and Guattari suggest that we approach language through the image of the rhizome, a subterranean system that sends off roots and shoots from its nodes, rather than as an object with a clear genealogy. As a result, we do not have to give putative precedence to one cause or another.[25] This allows us to accommodate all the forces at play within Hindi such as the "purifying" agenda of Hindutva ideology and the continued widespread usage of Arabo-Persian vocabulary. The questions of origin and difference between Hindi and Urdu have been treated ad infinitum and need not be rehearsed in detail here. However, we cannot begin to understand the unique position of Muslims writing in Hindi without briefly revisiting this vexed issue. The relationship between Hindi and Urdu has been fraught from the early nineteenth century, when the two languages were first enshrined as representative languages of Hindus and Muslims respectively, first by colonial scholar-administrators, and then by Indian intellectuals themselves.[26] As Mufti states above, this tension increased in tandem with the spread of the idea of separate national identities for Muslims and Hindus, with Hindu writers encouraged to write in Hindi and Muslim writers expected to write in Urdu. While the divide between Hindi and Urdu at the institutional level, as well as in respect of language ideology, is impossible to deny, a fluidity between them persists, and older practices survive alongside new ones. In other words, in post-Independence India, we

[25] The *Oxford Living Dictionaries* defines a rhizome as "A continuously growing horizontal underground stem which puts out lateral shoots and adventitious roots at intervals." (Oxford Living Dictionaries, accessed 7/2/2018).

[26] See Dalmia 1999, Rai.

can think of Hindi and Urdu simultaneously as both separate languages and as one language.

Moreover, after the creation of Pakistan and the diminished status of Urdu in India, a new generation of Indian Muslims arose for whom Hindi was the language of education and everyday use, and through which they could speak to a broader, general public. None of the authors examined in this thesis claims to have written in Hindi because of an ideological stance or a political position. They write in Hindi because it is the language in which they were educated and the language they are surrounded by. What they bring to Hindi is a particular accent—whether by using a Sanskritized register ironically or not, thus disassociating it from its putative Hindu roots, or by inserting Islamic tropes and terms and stories from their heritage into their own writings.

If Francesca Orsini, in *Before the Divide: Hindi and Urdu Literary Culture* (2010), writes about linguistic choices and literary practices before the Hindi-Urdu divide, this thesis asks, what happens "after the divide"? As Orsini writes, "the way to differentiate between Hindi and Urdu is more in terms of register and affiliation to a literary repertoire than in terms of alphabet" (2010, 3).[27] In this light, should we see writers such as Manzoor Ahtesham and Nasira Sharma as continuing a past tradition or rather as innovators?

Yet, this thesis argues, once Muslim authors write in Hindi they are compelled to contend with their "minor" position. For one thing, the ambivalent reception of Muslim authors writing in Hindi shows that the Hindi-Urdu debate has not died down and that the perception of a division between Hindi as associated with Hindus and Urdu as associated with Muslims still

[27] Interestingly, in Ahtesham's novels, for example, the script is Devanagari but the genealogy of influence or the "literary repertoire", consists mostly of Western literature, mediated through English. This calls for a re-assessment of the way we approach the Hindi-Urdu divide and forces us to include the role of English in the debate.

persists, as we will see in the context of Manzoor Ahtesham and Abdul Bismillah.

3 Minor Literature

This thesis approaches the writing of Muslim authors from their position as a minority within Hindi literature. The idea behind this approach comes from Deleuze and Guattari's concept of Minor Literature. In their seminal study *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (1975), Deleuze and Guattari argue that Kafka's writing stands out through his use of language and the "minor" position he occupied as a Jew living in Prague writing in German. They argue that "minor literature doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language" (16).

Minor Literature, in their view, is marked by three characteristics: the "[d]eterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation" (18). Deterritorialization is a concept central to Deleuze and Guattari's thinking, and it takes different shades of meaning in their various works. It usually indicates the ways in which authors, artists or simply speakers empty concepts of their familiar meanings and "reterritorialize" them by delinking them from a central power or authority:

> [Deterritorialization is] to make use of the polylinguism of one's own language, to make a minor or intensive use of it, to oppose the oppressed quality of this language to its oppressive quality, to find points of nonculture or underdevelopment, linguistic Third World zones by which a language can escape. (26-27)

In the context of Minor Literature, "deterritorialization" indicates the way in which minor authors, by the very act of writing in the major language, challenge inherent assumptions about the language and its community of

speakers. Language, and especially a national language, carries a world of connotations that naturalize particular cultural traits as "belonging to" or inherent in that language—for example, the link between Sanskritic vocabulary and cultural repertoire and Hinduism with Hindi. Muslim authors, who are perceived to "belong to Urdu" and thus to be outside the community of Hindi speakers or of the nation, disrupt or deterritorialize these expectations by writing in Hindi and claiming it as their language, too. As I will discuss in detail in Chapter One, the prominent critic Harish Trivedi has criticized Manzoor Ahtesham's language, saying "Manzoor Ehtesham betrays himself as basically an Urdu writer writing in Hindi" (31). In fact, Ahtesham employs a number of different registers, only some of which are more Urdu influenced. Trivedi's insistence on Ahtesham's "betrayal" of himself as an Urdu writer is just one example of the fraught relations between Muslim writers and their mostly Hindu critics. Another illustration of this tension occurs in the autobiographical sketch "Being Muslim in India" by the journalist Suhail Wahid. In this essay, which was published in the collection *Indian Muslims: myths and realities* (*Bhāratīya musalmān: mithak aur yathārth* 2004), he recounts the expectation that he should study Urdu literature and be an *Urdu* journalist. When he applies for a job with a leading Hindi newspaper, the senior journalist who interviews him only asks him about his ability to write in Hindi, and Wahid has to defend himself:

> [I was asked,] "Do you have any difficulties writing in Hindi? Why not? Do you translate from Urdu into Hindi?" […] He was not interested that, like others, I was interested in other world affairs, that politics and history are my subjects, too. (16)

Wahid also complains that, once employed by the Hindi newspaper, he was only given Muslim topics and news to write about, and protests, "I agree that I

should write on Muslim topics. They are my responsibility. But why wasn't I encouraged to write on other topics, too?" (Wahid, 17).

For Deleuze and Guattari, deterritorialization is usually followed by reterritorialization, which is the process by which language and concepts are imbued with new meanings and contexts.[28] In the case of Minor Literature, once minor authors have destabilized language expectations and borders, they re-set them according to different coordinates, coordinates in which they are no longer marginalized or in which their position is starkly clear rather than hidden away or obscured. For example, the Muslim protagonist in Abdul Bismillah's novel *Apavitra ākhyān*, discussed in Chapter Five, insists on speaking a Sanskritized Hindi and then correcting people who mistakenly assume him to be a Hindu. It is important to state here that not all authors from minority backgrounds necessarily create Minor Literature. Rather, it is those authors who focus on minorities and their marginal perspective who can be included into this category.

Summarizing the language debate from Muslim authors' perspective, Ulrike Stark writes:

> As Muslims who write in Hindi, the authors refute the widespread cliché that Muslim identity finds its adequate literary expression in the Urdu language only. Instead, they argue for the co-existence and mixing of Hindi and Urdu and refuse to grant the language issue importance as a fundamental ideological theme. This conciliatory attitude is reflected in the use of language in the novels, where the lexical borrowings from both Sanskrit and Persian-Arabic are employed in such a way that the distance between Hindi and Urdu appears to be bridged quite naturally. (242)

[28] There is no single accepted definition of reterritorialization, a word that Deleuze and Guattari use in a variety of ways that all correspond to my definition above.

Stark is only partially correct here. Indeed, in the work of some authors like Asghar Wajahat the distance between Hindi and Urdu is "bridged quite naturally" (see Chapter Three). This is also true of Nasira Sharma's language, which reflects both the Hindu-Sanskrit and Muslim-Persian Arabic heritage equally and does not give any special preference to one or the other (Chapter Four). However, Chapters One and Two show how Manzoor Ahtesham uses the tensions between the languages to great effect. For example, when an unnamed character in *Dāstān e lāpatā* who is identified as Muslim through his lexical choices uses *akhand bhārat*, a Hindutva term for a unified India, he mocks the very idea by saying that in a unified India that includes Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh, Muslims would no longer be a minority (87). This mocking could only be done through the voice of a Muslim character. By highlighting Hindi's joint background with Urdu through the deliberate mixing of lexical items, Ahtesham harks back to an era when the link between language and politics was different from today.

By contrast, Abdul Bismillah counters expectations by writing in a Hindi which is devoid of Urdu influence and in a style we would expect from Hindutva proponents rather than Muslims. Two of the titles of Bismillah's books explicitly link his language with Hindi's Sanskrit heritage. *Atithi devo bhava* (*Guest is God*, 1990) and *Apavitra ākhyān* (*An Impure Story*, 2008) are directly imported from Sanskrit, this being juxtaposed to Bismillah's clearly Muslim name. Compared with Manzoor Ahtesham's *Dāstān e lāpatā* (The Tale of the Missing Man, 1995), which includes a linking *izāfāt*, a Persian construction, we see how Muslim authors can use the tensions between Hindi and Urdu to great effect, in opposite ways but with the same goal.[29] Ahtesham's use of a Persian construction in the title of his novel undermines the Hindutva

[29] Mufti quotes Adorno: "A foreign word whose foreignness has not been fully assimilated into the host language, and its foreign origin not forgotten, can be used strategically for the 'explosive' and 'negative' power it carries within it" (75).

agenda of a Hindi cleansed of its Muslim influences. By contrast, by using the most "pure" form of Hindi possible for his titles, Bismillah shows that this kind of language does not exclude Muslims, thereby undermining the agenda of language purity as representing cultural, i.e. "Hindu" purity. Moreover, in *Apavitra ākhyān* Bismillah plays with the concept of linguistic passing. The Muslim protagonist works as a Hindi professor, and when he meets strangers, both Hindu and Muslim, he plays with their expectations by speaking a Sanskritized Hindi which immediately marks him as Hindu. By passing, he gets to hear what Hindus really think about Muslims and to see how Muslims treat Hindus.

The second characteristic of Minor Literature according to Deleuze and Guattari, "the connection of the individual to a political immediacy", claims that the pressure exerted on minorities "forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics. The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it" (17). This political dimension is essential in unearthing the hidden layers of the text, which is where Fredric Jameson's approach in *The Political Unconscious*, on which more below, complements Deleuze and Guattari's. Jameson provides the analytic tools for establishing a connection between the individual protagonists' individual psychology and the larger, collective, and political issues at stake. For example, when the protagonist of Manzoor Ahtesham's *Dāstān e lāpatā* is tricked into drinking alcohol and gets drunk for the first time in his life, his first thought leads him to the India-Pakistan border. "Looking at the empty no man's land in the middle he kept thinking that if he decided to go on foot would the hands on his wrist watch start flailing between both countries' standard time?" (91). Here, alcohol is the trigger for reaching the character's, or perhaps even the collective, political unconscious, and Ahtesham exposes the existence of Pakistan as a perennial parallel reality lurking beneath the ostensibly unified surface of Indian reality.

The failure of the love story between Suhail and his Hindu girlfriend in Ahtesham's *Sūkhā bargad* plunges him into a major crisis and undermines his ability to function and trust others as a Muslim in a Hindu-dominated society (see Chapter Two).

The third characteristic of Minor Literature, "the collective assemblage of enunciation", requires a more critical analysis. Deleuze and Guattari state that, "what each author says individually already constitutes a common action, and what he or she says or does is necessarily political even if others aren't in agreement. The political domain has contaminated every statement" (17). The individual is identified with the collective and with the community, whether they like it or not. For example, Suhail Wahid, quoted above, complains of the narrow scope of news he was expected to cover as a Muslim journalist in a Hindi newspaper: "In the office I was continuously reminded of my being Muslim. 'Muslim issues' become my 'unofficial beat'. Reports of riots and anything to do with Ayodhya were given to me" (17). Harish Trivedi's comment, also quoted above, shows how individual Muslim writers are always read through the lens of their community (Muslim, Urdu). This is an expectation that the authors discussed in this dissertation are both hyper-aware of but also try to subvert.

For example, Asghar Wajahat rejects the "collective enunciation." He does not become the voice of the community, and his novels show no signs that the responsibility of representation weighs heavily on him. In fact, as stated earlier, the Muslim community in North India is not a monolithic block, and there are many religious, political and regional factors at play that make Deleuze and Guattari's third characteristic problematic. Each individual author examined in this thesis has a very different position vis-à-vis the political discourse surrounding Muslims, and there is no sign of the "common action" posited by Deleuze and Guattari. The Muslim minority experience is so highly fragmented among different communities and positions that there exists little

scope for a "collective assemblage of enunciation" that is both collective and representative. Rather, the authors in this thesis each find individual ways to deal with the pressures placed upon them in accordance with their multiple religious, geographical and class affiliations.

At the same time, Minor Literature allows me to approach my selection of authors with a similar set of questions, even though they do not belong to a movement or necessarily share the same ideology. Unlike Dalit authors, for example, the writers in this thesis have no revolutionary agenda and no affiliation based on their shared minority identity. Yet how do their works articulate a minority experience and perspective? How do they link the personal with the collective and the political? What are the critical nodes, relationships and junctures that emerge in their works? Do they propose any kind of solution? How do they deterritorialize and reterritorialize language and history? How do they deal with the "collective assemblage of enunciation", both at the diegetic level of their characters' trajectories, relationships and thoughts, and the extradiegetic level of the narrators? In order to explore these questions, my methodological approach consists of a close reading of seven novels and a number of short stories by four authors, mainly employing Fredric Jameson's scheme, as elaborated in his book *The Political Unconscious* (1981). However, before turning to Jameson it is important to mention other approaches to Minor Literature in different contexts.

Simone Brioni's *The Somali Within: Language, Race and Belonging in "Minor" Italian Literature* (2015) is the closest engagement with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of Minor Literature that I have found. Brioni focuses on the literature of immigrants (including second and third generation immigrants) from Somalia and the introduction of their narratives into Italian literature. The three sections of the book are divided along the three characteristics purposed by Deleuze and Guattari and Brioni interrogates the texts primarily through their minor position as in this thesis. However, the postcolonial reality of the need to

mediate between at least two cultures, the Somali and the Italian, makes this Minor Literature very different from that of Muslims writing in Hindi who share the same culture as their Hindu neighbors. While Brioni's project contributes to our understanding of the shared issues, narrative choices (such as the use of autobiography) and deterritorialization of national languages by minorities who are deemed "other," the focus of this thesis is on the way the Muslim community in North India is being minoritized without the experience of migration. Moreover, while Brioni closely engages with Deleuze and Guattari he is often highly critical of their work. In my project, while still showing the limitations and shortcomings of Deleuze and Guattari's approach I use it to show the similarities between the experience of minorities during the formation and consolidation of the nation state. Showing how Kafka's experience as a Jew in Prague resonates with Ahtesham's experience as a Muslim in Bhopal for example.

Another deployment of Minor Literature in the last decade is Ali Behdad's essay , "Postcolonial Theory and the Predicament of Minor Literature", in *Minor Transnationalism*, ed. Lionnet and Shih (2005). However, Behdad's engagement with Deleuze and Guattari is for a critique of Postcolonial theory rather than for an in depth exploration of Minor Literature and therefore of limited interest to this project. Prior to this, the concept of Minor Literature received sporadic attention in the last decades. The most extensive attempt since Deleuze and Guattari is a book edited by Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd: *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse* (1990). Apart from Hanan Hever's essay, which discusses a Palestinian Israeli writing in Hebrew through the three characteristics of Minor Literature, I found that most of the "minority discourse" dealt with in the book falls outside Deleuze and Guattari's definition of Minor Literature as: "that which a minority constructs within a major language"(16). In this collection of essays the term "Minor Literature" is often used for literature in languages with few

speakers, such as Basque. This does not fit the case being discussed here. Finally, it is also important to mention another engagement with Deleuze and Guattari's definition of Minor Literature, Kim Chew Ng's "Minor Sinophone Literature: Diasporic Modernity's Incomplete Journey", in *Global Chinese Literature: Critical Essays*, ed. Jing Tsu and David Der-wei Wang (2010). Ng's work focuses on Chinese literature produced outside of China in South East Asia, mostly Malaysia and Singapore. His approach towards minority is twofold. The authors producing this literature are both minor since they have no representation in the literary circles of their own countries and they are minor since they are producing Chinese literature far from China and its imagined community of readers.

4 Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*

In *The Political Unconscious,* Jameson sets out an ambitious method for reading texts as symbolic acts addressing real problems. Jameson begins with the premise that each text is multi-layered and conceals "a prior historical or ideological *subtext*" (81, emphasis in the original).[30] This subtext is not just the author's but is the collective unconscious that rewrites itself through the text, with views and opinions in dialogue with each other that "are intelligible not because of their individuality but because of their class and status" (84). Jameson conceives of interpretation as an act of "strong rewriting", of finding the "master code", which is "a more fundamental interpretive code" (60) that reveals unconscious political thought. He goes on to argue that "the will to read literary or cultural texts as symbolic acts must necessarily grasp them as resolutions of determinate contradictions" (81).Jameson's scheme comprises three levels or "semantic horizons" of interpretation. In this project I use only

[30] All references to Jameson are to *The Political Unconscious* unless otherwise stated.

the first which is the political, the level of the individual text, which reads it as a "symbolic act" or as "the imaginary resolution of a real contradiction" (77).[31]

In the context of this thesis, the dominant contradiction that characters from the Muslim minority community face is the unachievable status of civic equality and the pervasiveness of communal divisions that link the personal to the political. Jameson's approach is particularly fruitful in understanding Manzoor Ahtesham's two novels discussed in Chapters One and Two. There I show that the protagonists of both novels, Suhail and Zamir, inexplicably fail as students despite their brilliant promise and undergo mental breakdowns just as they are supposed to become integrated as full members of society. Suhail and his sister Rashida both fail at intercommunal love relationships, in her case because of insurmountable internalized obstacles and the fear of a loss of identity. The other side of the contradiction is that her lover, who is also Suhail's best friend Vijay, cannot fully empathize with them and the pressures they experience and feel. Both siblings become more and more housebound, while the character of their city, Bhopal, changes drastically because of the influx of Hindus when it becomes the state capital of Madhya Pradesh. In *Dāstān e lapatā,* Zamir's inexplicable illness cannot be deciphered unless one "rewrites it" in the context of his minor vision against the backdrop of the Ramjanmabhumi movement. Along with this, Jameson's examples of the clash between the traditional and the modern show us how to unearth them at the level of the sentence and dialogue (253-255).

[31] The second level for Jameson are is the social, which reads the text as a vehicle for the "great collective and class discourses" (84, 86); here the analysis focuses on the ideologemes, those "minimal units" of ideological discourse that animate characters, their motives, and their enunciations (87). The third, and vastest, level is the historical, which Jameson links both to the sequences of modes of production and the ideology of form (98). Here the particular generic choices and formal elements actively present within a text carry "ideological messages of their own, distinct from the ostensible or manifest content of the works" (99).

In terms of the "ideology of form", Ahtesham's *Sūkhā bargad* qualifies as a "failed" or "dissensual *Bildungsroman*", to use Joseph Slaughter's term from *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (2007). According to Slaughter, the dissensual *Bildungsroman* "simultaneously asserts in principal and denies in practice the universality of rights and the abstract equivalence of citizenship" (152). We can read Suhail's struggles as representing the dissonance between the way he expects to be received in the world and his actual experiences of it, which continuously raise the possibility of discrimination while never being clear or obvious enough for him to articulate resistance to it. While Slaughter focuses on the failed *Bildung* of protagonists in war-torn or dysfunctional societies, we can apply his theory to Minor Literature since majoritarian public spheres do not provide a space for the creation of fully functioning minor characters.

Another way in which Jameson helps us is to read the "collective enunciation" of Muslim communities such as in the following passage:

> "Literary realism is generally understood as the collective expression of a social group or class [...] Realist literature is distinguished not by its verisimilitude or proximity to reality but by its expression of the consciousness of a social class, and moreover, that class's recognition of historical movement or change." (13)

While encouraging us to read the texts as expressions of tension between "social groups" Jameson also points us towards the way expressions of individual stories should be read in the context of larger processes which lead to alienation: "Modernist texts, in contrast, generally express an individual perspective disjointed or alienated from the developments of the modern world" (13). The authors in this thesis, which I now introduce, offer us individual narratives which can also be read through the "recognition of historical movement" of the minoritization of the Muslim community in North India.

5 The Writers and Thesis Structure

There is a strong autobiographical streak in all the novels and many of the short stories examined in this thesis. In order to understand how the personal intersects with the fictional, in this section I introduce each author.

Manzoor Ahtesham was born in 1948 in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, where he has lived all his life. He is a well-known Hindi author with five novels, numerous short stories and two plays to his credit.[32] Unlike the other the authors discussed in this thesis, Ahtesham did not complete his university education and has worked independently as an interior designer while writing in his free time. The two novels discussed in Chapters One and Two (*Dāstān e lāpatā* and *Sūkhā bargad*) take place in Bhopal and are rooted in its history as a princely state and as the capital of the new state of Madhya Pradesh. Ahtesham's writings explore the great tension between the dream of equality and the reality of subtle discrimination. The discrimination is never clear and could be said to be a figment of his protagonists' imagination. Furthermore, Ahtesham uses friendships and love stories between Muslims and Hindus in order to highlight the difference between intimate personal relations and the way Muslims are represented as a distinct and different community, a representation that even some Hindu friends adopt. The thesis starts with Ahtesham's later novel *Dāstān e lāpatā* and then returns to *Sūkhā bargad* in order to highlight the heightened tension surrounding Muslim identity during the ascendancy of the Hindutva ideology and to compare it with the more subtle "othering" that occurred before its rise. I will compare moments in both of Ahtesham's novels with scenes in Kafka's writing that resonate with each other

[32] The information I have about the authors comes from personal interviews, email correspondence, personal websites and the Sahitya Akademi website (accessed 18/6/2018).

in order to argue that specific conditions of minority can give rise to similar "symbolic solutions".

Asghar Wajahat was born into a Shia family in 1946 and grew up in Fatehpur, Uttar Pradesh. His ancestors were landowners and, like the majority of Shias, trace their roots through Persia all the way back to the Prophet. He attended Aligarh Muslim University, where he graduated with a PhD in Hindi literature and worked as a professor of Hindi at Jamia Millia Islamia University in New Delhi until his retirement. He has published numerous books, short stories and plays, which are sharply divided in terms of subject matter. While his novels are autobiographical and largely apolitical, many of his short stories deal with Muslim-Hindu tensions. Chapter Three discusses the significance of the lack of political tension in Wajahat's novels and explores whether this is a strategy aimed at normalizing Muslim narratives in Hindi. Another possible reading would suggest that the absence of political tension expresses the multiple parallel realities in North India that indicate that even today some Muslims do not experience minoritization as a pressing concern.

Nasira Sharma was born in 1948 in Allahabad, also in a Shia family. She completed an MA in Persian from Jawarhal Nehru University after studying at Allahabad University. She later married a Hindu and in the 1980s spent protracted periods reporting on both the Iran-Iraq war and the war in Afghanistan. She has published numerous books, including at least ten short-story collections, six novels, collected reportage from around Iran and Afghanistan, and translations from Persian. Chapter Four focuses on her Sahitya Akademi award-winning novel *Pārijāt* (2011). The novel is unique in that it harks back to a model of Indian identity based on the Ganga-Jamuni culture. Instead of representing communal tension, it offers a way out of the current paradigm of Hindu-Muslim rivalry by resurrecting an all-encompassing religious sensibility that accommodates Shia Islam and Hinduism together by representing the Hussaini Brahmin community, one of many North Indian

groups whose religious practices and beliefs cannot be neatly categorized under one specific religion.

The fifth and final chapter is devoted to the writings of Abdul Bismillah, who was born in 1949 in Uttar Pradesh, completed his PhD in Hindi at Allahabad University, and works as a professor of Hindi at Jamia Millia Islamia University in the same department as Asghar Wajahat. He too has published a number of novels and many short stories along with two books of literary criticism in Hindi. Bismillah's fiction, especially *Apavitra ākhyān* (2008), takes a caustic view of the prevailing situation in which Muslims are treated as scapegoats, but his stories expose the biases in both the Hindu and Muslims communities.

It is important to note that, apart from Sharma, none of these authors has any positive, affirmative agenda. There are no pretensions to be able to influence the world, no calls to arms, no attempt to rally readers. This lack of revolutionary zeal or a clear social agenda speaks volumes about the ambiguous position in which both the authors and their protagonists find themselves. This is in contrast to Dalit and African American Literature, which often has a clear political agenda—a call for equality—and aims to have an impact on readers and to serve as a catalyst for change. While African Americans and Dalits have traditionally used autobiographies as their entrée into the literary field, this has not been the case for Muslims writing in Hindi. However, apart from the writings of Sharma, all the novels examined here—though not the short stories—have a strong autobiographical source, with the main protagonist often a thinly veiled version of the author.

As Barbara Metcalf shows, a dominant genre of life histories in Indian writing, especially in the Indo-Persian tradition has often emphasized the person's "representing a 'timeless pattern'" and not individuality (11).[33]

[33] In Arnold and Blackburn ed.

Therefore, "significance is found in similarity, not difference" (11). This is especially important for Minor Literature where the authors strive to dispel "othering" and prove that they also belong within the fold.[34]

While the approach I have chosen in this thesis emphasizes the above authors' minority identity it is important to briefly situate them within the broader panorama of Hindi literature.

As Vasudha Dalmia shows, the focus of canonized Hindi novels has slowly shifted from the countryside to urban centers along with the increasing urbanization of India.[35] The authors in this thesis follow this trend. Ahtesham and Sharma's novels are intimately linked to the cities in which they take place (Bhopal for Ahtesham and Lucknow and Allahabad for Sharma). Wajahat and Bismillah's novels depict the protagonists who are either moving to urban centers (Delhi for Wajahat, an unnamed city in Bismillah's case) from the countryside or they are still intimately linked to their villages and return to them periodically.

While it would be possible to associate the novels discussed here with the tradition of partition novels lamenting the divide, this would be the narrowest interpretation possible. Rather the novels here can be located within the tradition of Hindi literature that focuses on the struggle between self and society especially against the background of modernity.[36]

I begin with Ahtesham's later novel *Dāstān e lāpatā* because it offers the clearest example of the contradictions of Muslim minority status in postcolonial India, symbolized by the protagonist Zamir Ahmad Khan's invisible ailment.

[34] Francesca Orsini's essay on Mahadevi Varma in Arnold and Blackburn ed. shows how a woman poet managed to insert biographical details without risking her position in the conservative milieu of 1920's male dominated Hindi literature. Varma's precarious position and her techniques resonate with the way Bismillah and Ahtesham use their own biographical material to create protagonists who can either reflect their personal experience or be plausibly termed as completely fictional.

[35] Dalmia 2017.

[36] See Gordon Roadarmel. For more recent work see Nikhil Govind.

The "solution" the novel offers is to split him between his social self, who seems to fail inexplicably, and what he calls the "missing" or *lāpatā* Bhopali, who cannot fail to register every subtle change in the public sphere of Bhopal. I then go on to Ahtesham's earlier novel *Sāukhā bargad*, which deals with the same inexplicable failure but through a different narrative form, that of what Slaughter calls the "dissensual *Bildungsroman*." The third chapter, on Asghar Wajahat's novels and short stories, which were published at the same time as Ahtesham's, serves as a reminder that Muslim authors do not necessarily write Minor Literature. In the chapter I show how Wajahat arguably resists this interpretation. Instead, he offers an idealized world in which the Muslim protagonists face no discrimination. The fact that he is all too aware of the reality of communal conflicts surfaces instead in his short stories, which carry more than an echo of Manto's pithy form, black humor, and emphasis on madness. The novel discussed in the fourth chapter, Nasira Sharma's *Pārijāt,* presents yet another stance towards the contradiction of Muslim minoritization, and a different narrative solution through what we may call a *roman à thèse*. For one thing, she shifts the contradiction from one between Hindus and Muslims to one between modern Indians and the West, and the form of the narrative follows the protagonist's disillusionment with this Western way of life and his rediscovery of his cultural identity. Secondly, she puts forward the Hussaini Brahmins who were present at the battle of Karbala as an example of the shared history of Muslims and Hindus and as an ideal integrated and inclusive identity. My final chapter deals with a counter *roman à thèse* which shows the impossibility of integrating the Muslim Hindi intellectual within the Hindi fold. The novel is a catalogue of contradictions and offers no solution.

Since this thesis contextualizes the authors and their works within the rise of Hindutva, it is important to note, before I turn to the close readings, that it is very rare for the texts under discussion to refer to concrete historical turning points such as the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992. The only direct

reference to the Shah Bano case and the Ramjanmabhumi movement occur in Manzoor Ahtesham's *Dāstān e lāpatā* (1995, 83). Asghar Wajahat's short story *'Shāh ālam camp kī rūheṁ'* (The Ghosts of Shah Alam Camp, 2002) is a direct response to the pogroms in Gujarat in 2002 and is the only instance in this corpus of texts of a piece written in direct response to a specific historical event.

6 Main Contributions

I see the main contributions of my thesis as, first, providing an elaboration of the concept of Minor Literature. Deleuze and Guattari's notion has often been mentioned though more rarely engaged with in any detail, and this is, to my knowledge, the first study that does so for a whole corpus of work. Moreover, by transferring the conceptual framework of Minor Literature from a European setting to India, this thesis lays the foundation for a comparison between specific local aspects and the shared global characteristics of Minor Literature.

At the same time—and I see this as my second contribution—I show that one needs to be careful and attentive to the ways in which different "Minor writers" choose to write or not write Minor Literature. For example, the difference in attitude towards the marginalization of Muslims in Abdul Bismillah's and Asghar Wajahat's work forces us to refine our understanding of the minoritization of Muslims in India and the particular trajectories of different communities and local histories. The changes in Bhopal with the shift from a Muslim majority to becoming a minority as described by Ahtesham are juxtaposed with Wajahat's Awadh, which seems to remain a safe haven for Shias throughout the post-Independence decades.

Beyond Minor Literature, the rubric of Muslim writers in Hindi allows me to show how these writers find quite different formal solutions to similar contradictions. That is, the authors in this thesis chose different literary techniques in order to portray the position of Muslims in Hindi. For example,

Nasira Sharma writes an ideological novel which allows her to promote her agenda of reviving the Ganga-Jamuni culture. Abdul Bismillah, on the other hand, writes an exposé of the bigotry that Muslims face in present-day India.

Finally, building on Ulrike Stark's earlier monograph on Muslim Hindi writers, this thesis focuses on post-partition writers, who deal with the marginalization of Muslims in contemporary India rather than with the history of Partition per se.

Chapter One: The Malady of being a Minority

> Anyone who cannot cope with life while he is alive needs one hand to ward off a little his despair over his fate… but with his other hand he can jot down what he sees among the ruins, for he sees different and more things than the others; after all, he is dead in his own lifetime and the real survivor.
>
> Franz Kafka (cited in Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 24)

> Whichever poem I like and is also respected by other poets is hated by the *lāpatā* Bhopali and incenses him beyond control. This happens with stories as well. All the events and characters I want to hide behind seven curtains so as to live peacefully, he gets excited by writing stories about them.
>
> Manzoor Ahtesham (*Dāstān e lāpatā*, 81)

1 Introduction

Dāstān e lāpatā (*The Tale of the Missing Man*, 1995) deals with one man's internal struggle against the backdrop of political upheaval.[37] It traces the gradual process of disintegration of an individual dealing with forces he cannot fully identify or define. The novel shows how the experience of a sensitive Muslim individual during the rise of the Ramjanmabhumi movement and the destruction of the Babri Masjid is reflected in the troubled psyche of Zamir Ahmed Khan, the protagonist of the novel. The narrative technique and structure of the novel destabilize the separations between fiction and non-fiction and between author, narrator and protagonist. It is often hard to track

[37] A translation of *Dāstān e lāpatā* entitled *The Tale of the Missing Man* by Jason Grunebaum and Ulrike Stark is due in August 2018. I have not seen it, and all the translations are my own.

the developing story because it is conveyed as a series of past and present events narrated through the dark lens of a failed present. This confusion is partially predicated on the fact that the novel is set in Bhopal and that its protagonist shares his age and many biographical details with the author, Manzoor Ahtesham, who was born in Bhopal in 1948 and has lived in the city all his life. The narrative revolves around Zamir's travails as he moves from failure to failure, and as his life progressively deteriorates and finally unravels. His problems are centered on a mysterious disease which is never named or fully described. This disease, which causes Zamir to suffer from dizziness, loss of balance and a fear of falling and travelling, radically disrupts his life. He is prone to plunging into uncontrollable states similar to epileptic fits, during which he becomes oblivious of his surroundings. The novel is structured around Zamir's search for both the cause of his disease and a cure. The search for a cure leads him to seek a doctor's help, and the quest to find the roots of his affliction is what drives the narrative forward as he analyzes his life and recounts past events.

Zamir's deterioration as an adult is juxtaposed with his youth. He makes a promising start as a bright young student who gets sent to Aligarh Muslim University, but after a year there he returns to Bhopal, never to leave the city again. Both the omniscient narrator and Zamir continuously jump back and forth between the present and the past creating a highly fragmented narrative, with a timeline that has to be reconstructed by the reader. Ahtesham, with his tongue in his cheek, tries to lend order to the narrative by placing "introductions" at the end of the first two sections, entitled "Introduction: An Intervention", and "One More Intervention: A Repeated Introduction." As we shall see, these authorial interventions merely blur the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction further by presenting the narrator as fundamentally unreliable. *Dāstān e lāpatā,* a work of many layers, can be read as a postmodern inquiry into ideas of the self, of autobiography and of the possibility of writing

a narrative which sacrifices linear development and coherence in its attempts to draw closer to a simulacrum of life. Without dismissing other possible readings, my reading attempts to show that what lies at the heart of *Dāstān e lāpatā* is the position of Muslims in India and Bhopal around the time of the Ramjanmabhumi movement and the Babri Masjid demolition.

Reading *Dāstān e lāpatā* through the lens of Minor Literature allows us to contextualize the forces behind its creation. There are clear similarities between *Dāstān e lāpatā* and some of Kafka's writings, namely, the respective characters' struggles with unnamed forces and a sense of looming threat in many social interactions.[38] These similarities allow us to speculate that both Ahtesham and Kafka tried reaching a "symbolic solution", to echo Jameson, of their outsider status. One of the ways they did this is by pushing the boundaries of literary conventions in order to challenge authority and the powers that keep them always on the threshold of the fold. My approach to the novel is based on Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* (1981), in which, as already outlined in the Introduction, Jameson searches for the deeper political forces at play beneath texts. The couplet affixed to the opening of the novel by the poet Zafar Iqbal: "Mercury shimmers on the surface of the water/ some shapeless form grinds the rock beneath" (*pānī pe kāṁptā hai koī pārā-pārā aks/ patthar ko cāṭtā hai koī nak̲ś̲e beniśāṁ*), shows that Jameson's approach is congruent with Ahtesham's authorial intentions as identified by his choice of the couplet and its emphasis on the "shapeless form" that is active beneath the surface.

Following the main narrative drive of the novel—Zamir's search for the origins and causes of his disease—this chapter is divided into six sections that bring to the surface the topics of: (a) somatizing social tension as a mysterious disease; (b) narrative structure and textual instability; (c) the fear of the inability

[38] It is interesting to note the similarities to the title of Kafka's uncompleted *The Man who Disappeared*. This was eventually published under the title *Amerika* (1927) by Max Brod.

to speak and express oneself; and finally (d) the connection of the individual to national narratives, namely the minoritization and stigmatization of Muslims during the Ramjanmabhumi movement. Another aspect that will be examined is the reception of *Dāstān e lāpatā* and the way in which many of its reviews focus on Ahtesham's language as a marker of his Muslim identity. After a brief discussion of the *dāstān* genre that is cited in the novel's title and of the opening scene of the novel in the doctor's office, I turn to a discussion of Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*. This is followed by readings of individual episodes in the novel that all revolve around the search for the origins and cure of Zamir's disease. The chapter ends with a discussion of the environment in which Muslim authors are received by means of a close reading of two reviews of the novel.

2 Novel or *dāstān?*

The use of the term *dāstān* in the title is pregnant with meaning. The *dāstān,* which means "story" in Persian, was a genre popular throughout Muslim societies in South and Central Asia that focused on heroic or mock-heroic adventures.[39] As well as hinting at narrative traditions before the Hindi–Urdu divide, the word *dāstān* in the title also invokes the ironic tone with which the narrator describes Zamir and his escapades. For, instead of adventure stories with heroes setting forth into the world on courageous missions, every time Zamir ventures outside he is in what feels like unknown territory and is too overwhelmed to act. Zamir is a failed hero or an antihero, but he is nonetheless the protagonist of this *dāstān*. Unlike the heroes of old, he does not need to venture forth into strange worlds; it is his hometown that has become a foreign place. His own surroundings are changing in front of his eyes; not merely the

[39] For more on the *dāstān,* see Pritchett.

physical roads and buildings, but the surrounding culture too, has become foreign to him.

The *izāfāt* (linking particle) in the title of *Dāstān e lāpatā* already hints at the book's questioning of boundaries. Hindi readers are able to comprehend this grammatical structure, but it is also widely understood to belong to Urdu and Farsi and to be "foreign" to Hindi.[40] In addition, the use of the word *dāstān* when talking about a novel adds another layer of meaning. The *dāstān* is a form of story-telling that, when written down, famously extended over several volumes, whereas *Dāstān e lāpatā*'s material shape, whether hardcover or paperback, with an excerpt from the book on its back cover, signals that it is obviously a modern novel (Pritchett, 27). In other words, there is already a slight sense of confusion before one even starts reading the work. The Muslim name of the author, the Urdu vocabulary and grammar, and the reference to *dāstān* all challenge one's inherent assumptions of what a Hindi novel should look or sound like.[41] The evolving relationship between Hindi and Urdu is one of the most direct ways through which Muslim writers can refer to the "othering" and marginalization of Muslims and Islamic culture in the social sphere. They can show how something is both familiar and foreign at the same time. Ahtesham, apart from deliberately employing an estranging Urdu register in the title, subverts the expectations of a heroic protagonist for the *dāstān* by first introducing him in a doctor's office where he is desperately looking for a cure for his disease.

[40] Perhaps we can understand this usage as similar to French phrases in English (avant garde, faux pas etc.).

[41] The title also highlights Bakhtin's formulation of how language carries within it many layers of meaning: "Thus at any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the coexistence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past" (1982, 291).

3 Dr Crocodile

From our very first introduction to Zamir, in the first line of the novel, we know that something is wrong with him. "The doctor looked at him with interest. Many of his teeth flashed with gold" (9). *Dāstān e lāpatā* starts with Zamir Ahmed Khan visiting a doctor whom he secretly calls Dr Crocodile (*ḍakṭar magarmach*) because of his bulging eyes and his mouth full of flashing gold teeth. The opening chapter is crucial because it places Zamir in the position of a problematic patient, a position he maintains throughout the novel. The doctor's questions serve as a device for laying out Zamir's biographical details and current circumstances, as well as allowing us access to Zamir's mind and the way he reacts to being labelled and diagnosed. The clinical setting, with the protagonist being interviewed about his disease by a doctor, introduces the reader to the novel as a search for the source of his mysterious disease. It also suggests a projection of the doctor–patient relationship into the relationship between reader and author, here between the Hindi/Hindu reader and a Muslim author's Hindi writing. Zamir rails against being seen as a patient rather than as an individual, just as Muslim authors resist being read solely through their religious identity. The doctor, however, wants to dispatch his patient in the shortest possible time and is not interested in his personal story or in treating him as an individual:

> The doctor started probing Zamir's body with his fingers, testing him in different ways, kneading and tapping him, looking and listening. The whole time his eyeballs rolled round and round inside his bloodshot eyes like an ambulance's rotating flashing red lights as it rushes through the streets. Maybe it was a warning: I'm in a hurry, get out of the way. (13-14)

The doctor's lack of interest is emphasized when he fails to find any problem with Zamir and declares him healthy in spite of Zamir's protests and genuine

requests for help. Ironically, the visit to the doctor only serves to exacerbate Zamir's condition, since now, having been declared fit by the doctor, he loses the solace of being able to call himself sick.

Zamir's relationship with the doctor symbolizes the situation of the weak in the face of authority, or, in the context of this novel, the experience of minorities in the face of the state. There are similarities between the way Ahtesham and Kafka represent the relationship between the majority and the minority or between the powerful and the weak. Doctors' pronouncements have gravitas and resemble the state in that they can pass judgment on their patients. This sentiment finds an echo in Kafka's short story "A Country Doctor": "Incidentally, it's easy to write prescriptions, but difficult to come to an understanding with people" (13).

As Deleuze and Guattari write, "Kafka manifests a permanent obsession with food [...] an obsession with the mouth and with teeth and with large, unhealthy, or gold capped teeth" (20).[42] Zamir's fixation on Dr Crocodile's teeth, mouth and eyes is reminiscent of "Little Red Riding Hood" and of Kafka's obsession. In both, the danger of the moment is expressed by the predatory nature of the enlarged eyes and threatening teeth. The doctor's gold teeth are like war medals, proof of his success within the system. Here, Zamir is next in line to be devoured and stripped of his self, his unique, irregular identity, in order to be neatly incorporated into the doctor's books and prescriptions. For Zamir, "all doctors have the same characteristics and the same nature" (10). [43] The frustration and terror that Zamir experiences when the doctor declares him healthy and dismisses his complaints is another way of describing his

[42] I am not arguing that Ahtesham is in dialogue with Kafka, rather I try to show how similar relationships create similar literary responses.This helps us understand both the shared characteristics of minority and the specific local variations.

[43] This is also a sentiment expressed by Rashida, the protagonist of *Sūkhā bargad* discussed in Chapter Two.

misunderstanding of the minor position and how traumatic this experience is for the powerless. How can this experience be conveyed? Even when Zamir has a fit in the doctor's office, the doctor thinks he is acting, and instead of doubting his own diagnosis commends Zamir on his dramatic skills.

Zamir is allergic to being incorporated into a language which erases his unique identity, but he is forced to agree with the doctor, who has authority, and he cannot resist repeating the well-known Hindi saying: "While in the water, don't antagonize the crocodile" (10). The doctor does not like this comparison, and Zamir immediately feels sorry for mentioning it. The important point is that the check-up situation is potentially dangerous for the helpless patient, as the doctor has the authority and the ability to devour him metaphorically. For Zamir, the situation of being a passive patient in the hands of authority repeats itself on each of his countless visits to doctors during his search for a cure:

> "Doctor sahab", he tried to say as a way to begin. But what was it that he could tell him clearly?! The fact that, while walking, lying down or sitting, while silent or talking to someone, his mind could suddenly open up, and there would be changes of light like the play of sun and shade across fields and mountains. He completely forgets himself and his surroundings, feeling as if his inner balance is failing and that if he doesn't immediately take control of himself he will fall into some chasm. A feeling of silence and non-being envelopes him all of a sudden, and in order to save himself from the fear of falling, he is forced to strike a pose which will balance him. This is a terrifying affliction—how can he explain it! Was it an imbalance of the body or of the mind? Or an imbalance between mind and body? It felt as if something had shifted between his body and soul and was sliding around […] he wanted to appeal to the doctor for help so that he would find some cure. (11-12)

After this candid description and plea for help, all the doctor does is ask him what work he does. The doctor repeatedly refuses to see an individual with a unique story and wants to place him instead in a pre-defined box. We can also

see how Zamir calls these moments "disappearing" (*gāyab)*, since he no longer exists as an individual. What is this quality of being missing? Some disjuncture between self and society? An inability to express oneself and mark one's presence? Obviously there is no single answer, but this question lies at the heart of Zamir's journey of discovery and of the novel itself.

When asked about his job, Zamir launches into a confessional monologue enacted in his head. After this detailed internal speech, in which he talks about everything personal, including his ambiguous sexuality and relations with his wife, he looks into the doctor's eyes and senses that this is no time for a complete unburdening. Instead, he answers in a way he imagines to be correct: "'Business', he tried saying with a firm voice" (13). Throughout the novel, and especially throughout his interactions with the doctor, Zamir does not simply do things; rather, he constantly *makes an effort* to do them. Words such as *prayatn karnā* (to try) and *kośiś* (attempt) are often affixed to descriptions of his actions.

In a bid to win the doctor's confidence, Zamir tells him that his wife has left him. He describes how, over the years, she transferred her soul back to her parents' house bit by bit with every visit. The doctor thinks that this description is hilarious and bursts out laughing. Zamir's attempts to get proper attention for his disease and the problems in his life is met with misunderstanding and an unwanted reaction. The doctor thinks he is a joker and has to wipe tears of laughter from his eyes. Zamir, on the other hand, is forced to swallow the humiliation. However, as he is leaving the office, he has a fit and starts flailing around as if having an epileptic attack. The doctor thinks this is all part of the show and looks on in appreciation at Zamir's antics, failing to recognize his genuine helplessness (16). Again, Zamir refers to the doctor's face in the Kafkaesque terms children use to describe terrifying adults. The first thing he sees when he slowly comes out of his fit is the "crocodile's round, round eyes!"(16). He is so upset at the gravity of his condition remaining

unrecognized and so insulted at being laughed at that he tells the doctor to go to hell and storms out of the office, though not forgetting to take his prescription with him (17). The context of the hierarchical relations between Zamir and the doctor, emphasized by Zamir's need for the prescription even as he tries to break away from the doctor, can be read as the tension between the majority and its dependent minority. In other words, even when minorities are discriminated against by the majority, or suffer violence while the state turns a blind eye, they are forced to apply to the same majority or state for protection. Just as Zamir is dependent on the doctor and his prescription, even though he was humiliated by him, so the minority are dependent on the majority for their well-being even while they are suffering at their hands.

In the following section I turn to Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* as an appropriate methodology for approaching the subtext hiding in plain sight beneath interactions such as those between Zamir and Dr Crocodile. *Dāstān e lāpatā's* preoccupation with what lies unseen and directs the course of action (to paraphrase the opening couplet) invites, or even demands of the reader, that he or she contextualize the novel within its time and in relation to the dominant political forces.

4 The Political Unconscious

Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* (1981) argues for a political interpretation of texts and for viewing narratives as symbolic solutions to real tensions existing at different points in history. Using Jameson's strategy of "rewriting" texts as a critical tool through which to reach the subtext, we can "rewrite" *Dāstān e lāpatā* through the lens of Minor Literature. For Jameson, the ultimate subtext is class conflict, but here I will use his model to discuss the interpenetration of religious and social divisions. In discussing the text as a symbolic solution to underlying contradictions, Jameson cites Lévi Strauss's *La*

Pensée Sauvage (1962). Lévi Strauss describes how "[so-called primitive people] project decorative or mythic resolutions of issues they are unable to articulate conceptually" (79). Jameson continues by suggesting that the way to identify the source of the tension is through

> [t]he rewriting of the literary text in such a way that the latter may itself be seen as the rewriting or restructuration of a prior historical or ideological *subtext*, it being always understood that the "subtext" is not immediately present as such, not some common-sense external reality, nor even the conventional narratives of history manuals, but rather must itself always be (re)constructed after the fact. (79)

I argue that *Dāstān e lāpatā* can be read as a reaction to the contradictions and impasses that Muslims of Ahtesham's generation face in Bhopal. However, as Jameson warns, "the literary work or cultural object, as though for the first time, brings into being that very situation to which it is also, at one and the same time, a reaction" (41). That is, by articulating the struggles of minority characters, it also runs the risk of strengthening them. In other words, the narrative has to maintain a balance between representing the effects of marginalization while not normalizing it as natural. *Dāstān e lāpatā* points towards the impossibility of maintaining an independent secular Muslim identity but risks stating this as a fact rather than warning against it. This is the reason that the narrative is so fragmented and self-contradictory, as we shall see in the following sections. Jameson helps us understand further how a text such as *Dāstān e lāpatā,* through its quintessential instability, manages to represent what cannot be presented in a straightforward manner:

> It seems useful, therefore, to distinguish, from this ultimate subtext which is the place of social *contradiction*, a secondary one, which is more properly the place of ideology, and which takes the form of the *aporia* or the *antinomy:* what can in the former be resolved only through the intervention of praxis here comes before the purely contemplative mind

> as logical scandal or double bind, the unthinkable and the conceptually paradoxical, that which cannot be unknotted by the operation of pure thought, and which must therefore generate a whole more properly narrative apparatus—the text itself—to square its circles and to dispel, through narrative movement, its intolerable closure. (82-83)

To remain at the level of analyzing the political tensions between Hindus and Muslims is a way to articulate the aporia, the impasse that Zamir faces in his life. However, to reduce Zamir's friendship with his Hindu best friend (who will be introduced in detail later in the chapter) to their communal background is to create the subtext which *Dāstān e lāpatā* warns against. With its homosexual undertones and fluctuating intimacy and enmity, this friendship is an expression of the antinomy, the mutual incompatibility of Hindus and Muslims. Jameson prompts us to regard the novel as a non-committed text precisely because it does not want to articulate the situation it is fighting against. It seems that Ahtesham wants to remain at the level of the contradiction without expressing an ideological stance. But of course this is impossible, and the text serves as a warning against the situation it itself creates and foresees. Jameson then goes on to show how "rewriting" the text affords an understanding of the "subversive strategies" of novels such as *Dāstān e lāpatā*:

> Such reconstruction is of a piece with the reaffirmation of the existence of marginalized or oppositional cultures in our own times, and the reaudition of the oppositional voices of black or ethnic cultures, women's and gay literature, "naive" or marginalized folk art, and the like. But once again, the affirmation of such non-hegemonic cultural voices remains ineffective if it is limited to the merely "sociological" perspective of the pluralistic rediscovery of the other isolated social groups: only an ultimate rewriting of these utterances in terms of their essentially polemic and subversive strategies restores them to their proper place in the dialogical system of the social classes. (86)

Dāstān e lāpatā is a "reaffirmation of the existence of marginalized or oppositional cultures". It is subversive not because it uses a fragmented

narrative, but because it deterritorializes the expectations of a Hindi novel by expressing a voice that is both internal and external to the "imagined community" of Hindi readers, both from within and from without at the same moment. That is, the novel uses the language of the majority to tell the story of a minority perspective. Bringing both Jameson and Deleuze and Guattari together allows me to "rewrite" the production of marginalized groups such as Muslims writing in Hindi as Minor Literature which brings the "isolated" voices into the national language. *Dāstān e lāpatā* reterritorializes the story of a conflicted individual Muslim protagonist whose suffering is linked to the social and political atmosphere which is marginalizing Muslims. While being part of the story of the wider community, it challenges its hegemony by inserting a voice which cannot be neatly categorized and which articulates a criticism from an individual perspective. The motivation generating the narrative is Zamir's search for the source of his disease. Thinking in terms of the "Political Unconscious" allows us to call this search an attempt to formulate that which cannot be expressed, the unconscious political layer which manifests itself in non-verbal modes such as unexplained diseases.

5 The Disease

The focus of the novel is on the small, at times almost imperceptible changes that lead to dramatic events such as violence and the disintegration of older forms of community.

> Big changes and accidents, the death of politicians, the big developments arriving in the wake of an election, the establishers of new records of destruction and ruin, a drought or a flood, or a war fought against some country. All these remain in the memory of people. But small and insignificant things that work like medicine or a disease slowly influence the sick person's body. These small things, which chart the course of coming events in a definitive way, usually disappear from the mind. (157)

I read this passage as defining Ahtesham's project in *Dāstān e lāpatā* as one of describing the minutiae of events that add up into a personal or larger history. Part of the power of the novel is the way in which the lines dividing the personal and the public are challenged and often erased. This is exemplified by the observation in which the narrator describes Zamir as fighting, or having, two different forces within him: a masked bandit (*naqābpoś luṭerā*) and an untrustworthy refugee (*beimān śarṇārthi*, 111). Both are examples of the way in which tensions in the social sphere enter individual identity and become dangerous forces there. Zamir Ahmed Khan is described as having a shadow, which he calls the *lāpatā* Bhopali or "the missing Bhopali", who follows him everywhere and who refuses to let things go. "He [the *lāpatā*] is alienated by everything in the world" (84). This shadow figure is also one of the main generators or manifestations of Zamir's ailment.

Zamir's disease is crucial for understanding the narrative as a whole and the character of Zamir Ahmed Khan in particular. The fact that the disease is unnamed, never fully described and dismissed as nothing by those surrounding Zamir, emphasizes its mystery. The disease appears to be a physical manifestation of the impossible situation Zamir finds himself in. His inability to cope with the contradictory demands of his surroundings has strange physical manifestations. We learn from the beginning about Zamir's propensity to exist simultaneously on two planes, those of his internal and external worlds, and the disjuncture between them is a cause for the disease. This causes him to feel out of sync in social interactions and raises a question: Is this a problem minorities feel more acutely? Does the external world shaped by the majority consciousness leave minor individuals feeling alienated?

The first section of the book describes key figures in Zamir's childhood. At the end of every description, the reader discovers that the reason for mentioning these characters is Zamir's attempt to find the source of his disease

in these childhood relationships and moments. The first character introduced is Murshad, a blind beggar who serves as a custodian of the mosque and sleeps in the room where the bier used for funeral processions is kept:

> What was it that trapped Murshad in the narrow storage room of the mosque? And what was it that changed Zamir Ahmed Khan's living room into a cellar in front of his eyes in spite of his marrying Rahat? Was it only the black tongue of the Maulavi who came to teach him and his brother?
> What was it, what was it in the beginning?! The possibility of success, or the certainty of failure? (33)

Zamir compares his current isolation at home to Murshad's living conditions in the storage room and is obsessed with finding that moment in which his life went wrong, thinking perhaps that his religious teacher the Maulavi had cursed him. As in the case of Murshad, other events are seen as part of the source of the disease. Zamir's family had a parrot that was the apple of his mother's eye, and she dies at its feet after reciting her morning prayers (24). This parrot knew how to say polite Urdu greetings and the opening of the Koran. But parrots signify unthinking repetition, and this is anathema to Zamir. His life choices show that something powerful in him resists this tendency towards the mechanical, even at the cost of living as a failure. After his mother's death Zamir frees the family parrot and lies about what happened, denying having anything to do with its disappearance. We understand his act as a futile attempt at self-individuation. It is unclear whether his over-sensitivity prevents him from sticking to the path of meaningless repetition or whether his disease and its symptoms of instability suggest that he is leaving the over-trodden path of an emptied tradition. In other words, the speed of changes around him and the moribund tradition are both causes of his being lost. After he releases the parrot we learn: "Suddenly his own way of thought became so dense and heavy that

his difficulties in keeping his balance became much worse than before and even felt impossible" (25).

Another potential source of the disease is Zamir's inability to make sense of the society around him and to differentiate between the formal and the non-formal, the private and the public. In their first meeting after years of not speaking to each other, Zamir's former business partner Sharafat Miyan explains to Zamir why their partnership broke down. "The real problem with you was that it was never clear when the business ended and where the personal started!" (212). The narrative repeatedly highlights the problems of the boundary between personal, professional and public. For example, Zamir spends years attending university but continually fails to make progress in his engineering degree (178). When his friends suggest that he re-take the exam and that they will bribe someone to make sure he passes, he refuses to cooperate, even though this would promise him a job (177-179). As he proves incapable of studying due to his condition and is too naïve to advance by any other means, his friends eventually give up on him. Zamir's failure to understand the social norms of his surroundings is compounded by his refusal or inability to take action.

A more extreme case of a failed relationship is that between Zamir and his father. Perhaps the only one to understand that Zamir has a real problem, or is really sick, is Zamir's father on his deathbed. Zamir's father does not recognize him, even though he is assured by all that the man standing in front of him is Zamir:

> Father's death was so dramatic that till his last breath he recognized mother, bhai miyan, apa, all of the household's children, he even recognized distant relatives and talked to them calling them by name. But about him [Zamir], hours before his eyes were shut he repeated the question again and again, "Where is Zamir?" Father saw him but refused to recognize him and asked "Where is Zamir?" He would hear the question and say, "Father, I am Zamir, standing in front of you". But

> father would shake his head disconsolately and say, "Zamir? Where is Zamir?" (206)

Zamir's father, with the prophetic vision of the dying, recognizes that Zamir is already missing, has already become *lāpatā.* Here, the intergenerational conflict is so sharp that father and son are lost to each other. As we shall see in more detail in the following chapter, the failure of the father to recognize the son or to understand his struggles is central to Ahtesham's expression of minority tension.

As we shall see in the next section, Zamir's inter-personal relations give expression to the way he suffers from misunderstanding and unease.

6 Cross Communal Friendship

Dāstān e lāpatā has a multitude of characters. It includes detailed descriptions of Zamir Ahmed Khan's friends, love affairs and the figures that influenced him during childhood. His relationships with his close family and even with his wife are treated cursorily, while his friends and romantic misadventures are prioritized. Zamir's relationship with his best friend and confidant Vivek eventually deteriorates when Vivek, a Hindu, cannot understand Zamir's perspective as a Muslim and refuses to sympathize with him. The tensions within the friendship serve the function of highlighting their inability to understand each other and the unbridgeable gap of their belonging to different communities.

The defining moment that seals Zamir and Vivek's friendship occurs when they discover in high school that their names have the same meaning—conscience or discrimination—in Urdu and Hindi (57). The main meaning of *vivek* is judgment or reason, but Vivek himself says: "Anyway the meaning of *vivek* is exactly like conscience (*zamīr*)" (57). This coincidence becomes the basis of a firm friendship. The shared moral imperative carried by their names makes

them both more sensitive to their surroundings. After he returns from Aligarh, Zamir is angry at Vivek for breaking his word, making a new friend and staying in Bhopal rather than going to Delhi to study as they had agreed. He describes the situation between them as a "cold war": "Between him and Vivek a third character by the name of Asim [lit. 'borderless, boundless'] had appeared and became Mr Kashmir, with whom any kind of understanding or compromise was impossible" (128). This sudden introduction of Kashmir into their relationship comes as a surprise, since their friendship had so far been completely devoid of political tension and free from any communal differences. Even when Zamir is tricked into drinking alcohol, he is not angry with Vivek's Hindu uncle for cheating him. He does not understand the event as a Hindu insidiously causing a Muslim to defile himself, but rather as an admired uncle pushing a young man to grow up and experience the world. By contrast, the mention of having a "Kashmir" between Zamir and Vivek marks a new turn in Zamir's understanding of his relationship not only with Vivek, but with Hindus in general. Only when Zamir starts experiencing problems does the connection to his Muslim identity emerge.

> Thinking about it today, Zamir Ahmed Khan saw that the changes in the Zamir–Vivek relationship after his return from Aligarh seemed very similar to the changes in the India–Pakistan one after the 1965 war. First of all, this war or conflict was between two sides that at some point used to be unified. Secondly, despite all the reasons for visible and invisible enmity, it was impossible for both sides to stay away from each other for long. Thirdly, the history of love and friendliness between the two was much longer than the enmity. And even if one were to ignore all the surface similarities, one of the biggest realities of life is that countries don't choose neighbours and people don't choose friends. They are just there. (112)

Here we have one of the clearest parallels between Zamir's personal life and the historical context in which he lives. Again and again Zamir identifies with

Pakistan, and his personal tensions are understood to have similar characteristics to the national ones. This alignment between self and larger politics is presented as natural, yet it is always bubbling beneath the surface of his consciousness. In other words, Zamir uncritically links his personal experience with Vivek to the experience of enmity and closeness between India and Pakistan. As we shall see in the next example, the relationship between India and Pakistan is never far from Zamir's mind.

The conflation or confusion between individual and communal or national identity occurs when Zamir describes the first time he drinks alcohol in the chapter titled 'First Alcohol'. Vivek's uncle tries to convince Zamir to drink, but Zamir remains steadfast in his refusal. Finally the uncle tricks him by mixing whisky in a soda bottle and telling him to drink the soda so that he can at least join the drinkers by swallowing something:

> In the interval of those few moments between taking the first sip and swallowing, the thoughts that accompany life spread out over thousands of meters. Almost similar to the stupid feeling he had once before when he had visited the India–Pakistan border at the Hussein checkpoint. Here were some soldiers, some on-lookers and the tricolor [Indian] flag. In front of them an empty space, no man's land. On the other side of this empty space, some other soldiers and onlookers with a green, moon and star [Pakistani] flag. Looking at the empty no man's land in the middle, he kept thinking that if he decided to go on foot, then would the hands on his wrist watch start flailing between both countries' standard times? (91)

The trauma of drinking alcohol, which Zamir describes as a watershed moment in his life, immediately evokes the feeling that he felt when visiting the India–Pakistan border, a morbid curiosity, a feeling of being suspended in time, a desire to know what takes place in a place that is not a place, a no man's land. After the moment passes, Zamir throws up violently and sinks into a "strange kind of sad and dejected mood" (91). The minute Zamir's equilibrium and

surface consciousness are breached, political tension is the first thing to well up, specifically the tension between India and Pakistan from the perspective of an Indian Muslim. Pakistan is both a geographical location where relatives live and an immediate reference point for Indian Muslims when they have a knee-jerk reaction. The chapter ends with a list of problems that Indian Muslims face, and the Babri Masjid is mentioned for the first time in the novel (94).

The representation of Zamir's sensitivity to the tensions between India and Pakistan is coupled with descriptions of those who manage to extricate themselves from the charged geography of Bhopal and South Asia and move to the land of new beginnings, the United States. Thus, the United States itself also plays a role in Zamir's emotional geography. Two people to whom he was very close, a kind of gang-leader figure named Aziz who calls himself Achan, a Hindu rather than a Muslim name, and a wealthy widow with whom Zamir has an affair, both migrate to the United States. This fantasy of the West is represented in Ahtesham's later novels as well. In *Sūkhā bargad*, an influential character moves to the United States after trying and failing to live in Bhopal. The West, especially the United States, also plays a role in the writings of Asghar Wajahat and Nasira Sharma. In Nasira Sharma's *Pārijāt* (Chapter Four), the West represents a grave danger to Indian traditions and is shown to be an empty promise leading not to a new life but to a loss of tradition. For Manzoor Ahtesham and Asghar Wajahat (Chapter Three), on the other hand, the United States serves as a refuge from the tensions and problems of India and represents an opportunity to start life afresh.

7 Authorial Interventions

Ahtesham not only expresses his viewpoint through his narrative. Twice in the novel he interrupts the narrative flow ostensibly to clarify the position of the narrator and his shadow, the *lāpatā*, but actually with the effect of blurring the

boundaries even more. Ulrike Stark, in the only full-length English-language essay on *Dāstān e lāpatā,* has argued:

> His [Ahtesham's] initial emphatic rejection of an autobiographical interpretation of the hero-figure is a thinly disguised pose which soon gives way to a more complex interpretation, illustrative of what has been called the "autobiographical paradox." ("In Search of the Missing Self", 479)

Stark rightly approaches *Dāstān e lāpatā*'s textual instability as pointing towards what she calls an "autobiographical paradox". I propose taking this paradox one step further and aligning it with what Jameson calls "social contradiction," specifically the contradictions of being a minority (82). Reading this meta-diegetic intervention through the lens of Minor Literature and the "strong rewriting" of the political unconscious, I argue that these authorial interventions serve as another strategy to provoke the reader to look for underlying layers in the text. In the middle of the narrative, on page 79, a chapter entitled "Introduction: An Intervention" appears with no prior warning. The chapter begins with this disclaimer worded in contradictory fashion:

> Generally introductions come right at the beginning of novels and the author uses them to say a few words about his writing. Usually the subject of these introductions is the novels themselves (or some other issue of concern to the writer). But these introductions aren't an integral part of the story. Whoever wants to, can read them, whoever wants to, can skip them. Neither option influences the main body of the text. Breaking from tradition by writing this introduction is perhaps a result of the fact that, from the perspective of the writer, this is an integral part of the story, even while it might be an external intervention. Fulfilling my responsibility, I would like to present my idea in a more detailed way by presenting it to the reader. Knowing my own limitations and abilities, I find myself morally compelled to do this.
>
> First of all I want to acknowledge that this text is an attempt (whether successful or unsuccessful, that is for the reader to decide after

> reading the whole novel) to write a novel whose characters, events, even the time period itself is one hundred per cent fictional [...].
>
> To make this even clearer, I will say that the protagonist of the novel—'he' or 'Zamir Ahmed Khan'—is not me. I'm saying this so forcefully since I am aware that many people might object. Those people won't be completely wrong; I think it is also my responsibility to say so. (79)

This break in the narrative disrupts the flow of *Dāstān e lāpatā* and adds a new layer to the experience of reading since the author is supposedly "coming clean", leaving fiction aside and explaining things as they are. However, in the space of two paragraphs he manages to say one thing and its opposite, both that the novel is completely fictional, and that readers will not be mistaken if they see similarities between the author and Zamir Ahmed Khan. This postmodern fragmentation, or emptying his statements of any stable meaning, continues throughout the introduction. By employing a confessional tone, as if trying to circumnavigate or transcend fiction, the narrator adds another layer of confusion to the text. The different relationships and unclear boundaries between characters create a muddle with no key for purposes of interpretation. The characters of Zamir Ahmed Khan, his *lāpatā*, the narrator and finally of Ahtesham himself all become mixed up. A Russian doll technique is being employed: on the external level we have Ahtesham the author; then we have the unnamed narrator who might or might not be Ahtesham; we then have Zamir Ahmed Khan, who shares his biographical details with Ahtesham, and finally his shadow self, the *lāpatā*. All these figures fold into one another. The introduction is written without the ironical tone that often permeates the rest of the text. Ahtesham writes in such a subversive way that, at the moment when earnestness is introduced and the details are supposedly set in order, things become impossible to untangle. In other words, in the guise of making the picture clear by dropping the pretense of fiction, Ahtesham blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality even further.

The narrator goes on to say that Zamir and he share the same height, body and behaviour, and that the fictional city of Bhopal is just like the real one. After claiming that the novel is one hundred per cent, fictional he says:

> I believe that every individual is forced to live with such a character of his imagination and that distinguishing between the imagined and the imaginer can sometimes prove as hard as it must be for Sufis, saints and enlightened people to tell the difference between God and Allah (*īśvar aur allāh*). I call this character of mine "*lāpatā*", even though he is the flower of my own imagination. I am, perhaps, the person who is most unaware of his fragrance. (80-81)

If it is hard for the narrator himself to tell the difference between his real and fictional selves, what can the reader do? Why is this introduction "an integral part of the text"? Why is this confusion so important? What is the nature of this *lāpatā* part, and what is its significance? Ulrike Stark reads the novel as a postmodern exploration of identity and as a "fictional biography" in which Ahtesham presents an "unreliable hero [as] part of a playful refusal of the conventions of realist fiction ("In Search of the Missing Self", 485). Zamir's problems are a direct consequence of the pressure exerted on Muslims in a political system which talks the language of secularism but practices a form of insidious discrimination which is hard to identify and resist. These moments of discrimination, or perceived discrimination, occur between Zamir and Vivek. For example, at the end of the novel Vivek, whose parents are Partition refuges from the Punjab, claims a blood relationship to the soil, implicitly denying Zamir of having one (234).

The fragmentary and self-subverting statements made in the introduction are a doomed attempt to reach some kind of stable ground or definition of self in a political system which does not permit it. This reality is what makes the tone of *Dāstān e lāpatā* so despairing. There is an unnamed,

indescribable force or system which places the individual in an endless series of impossible situations and conditions.

> Sometimes I also have the exact opposite feeling that the *lāpatā* is not someone else but completely and absolutely my twin, which, as is proved by other things, is not completely true. In order to simplify even more, we all live our lives with such a *lāpatā* who, while being "us", is not really "us". Another interesting thing is that, in spite of the clear differences between various people, it feels like all the *lāpatā*s are similar to each other and even uniform. In comparison with flesh and blood people, understanding a *lāpatā* is much easier. (81)

This passage has an undertone of two Jungian concepts, the collective unconscious and the shadow figure, which I will explore more closely after establishing what pressures make *lāpatā*s uniform or at least very similar. Again I would argue that it is the "othering", the minoritization that certain communities undergo in the process of defining the nation. This is the opposite of Tolstoy's famous opening of *Anna Karenina*, where he claims that "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." (1) This is a majoritarian viewpoint. When there is systematic pressure, the unhappiness becomes uniform and the happiness is free to take on various expressions.

The *lāpatā* can also be approached as a shadow using Jungian terminology:

> The shadow is not the whole of the unconscious personality. It represents unknown or little-known attributes and qualities of the ego—aspects that mostly belong to the personal sphere and that could just as well be conscious. In some aspects, the shadow can also consist of collective factors that stem from a source outside the individual's personal life. (Jung, *Man and His Symbols*, 174)

The shadow can represent the unarticulated sides of one's personality. In Zamir's case his shadow takes greater and greater control of his life, just as Jung

warns will happen if the shadow is not confronted and incorporated into the self. With Zamir it is obvious that part of his shadow has a collective aspect and that the narrative is full of parallels drawn between his personal life and the historical events occurring around him, events which usually highlight the precarious position of Muslims in India. Zamir's disease can be linked to the fact that his shadow part becomes more and more dominant and does not allow him to participate in daily life as a functioning individual. The crux for Zamir, and the question asked throughout the novel, is how much of this is Zamir's personal responsibility and how much is due to external factors.

After introducing the *lāpatā*, the narrator describes him as a poet and writer who hates conventions:

> All those events and characters I want to hide behind seven curtains and live peacefully, he gets excited by writing stories about them […]. The events in life which I want to forget or ignore by trying to move the *Samjhautā* Express ("Compromise Train") from the past to the future, the *lāpatā* wants to count every milestone and stop to rest at every point. (81)

The surprising moment in this passage is the mention of the *Samjhautā* Express. This is the name of the train between India and Pakistan which is the only rail link between the two countries and is a symbol of cooperation. The reference to this train when the narrator is discussing his relationship with his shadow side is striking. Again, as mentioned above, once we breach the surface of consciousness, the first thing that arises is a reference to the tension or relationship between India and Pakistan. Furthermore, here the narrator is trying to describe how he handles his internal tensions, and the reference point he chooses is the *Samjhautā* Express. What is he trying to say? Do India and Pakistan both exist in his imagination in a way that demands constant mediation? Does an Indian Muslim need to constantly make compromises, running back and forth between two opposing sides?

The following reflection leads us closer to the source of Zamir's disease, that is, the meaning of being a *lāpatā*:

> The things that I have forgotten, the oversights that happened, the mistakes and cheating, these things which now have no other witness in the world and which I have been successful in forgetting to quite an extent, these things seem such a heavy load to him. He [the *lāpatā*] puts such a heavy load on his head that he loses balance with each step! The mistakes he has made make taking just a few steps difficult! And he is so naive that he can't understand the source of his disease. (82)

Zamir is sick because his *zamīr*, his conscience, will not allow him to break free from the political tensions around him. The reason he suffers from vertigo and dizziness is because the personal and political burden on his shoulders is so heavy that he cannot achieve balance. Kafka, in one of his earliest diary entries, mentions a similar sensation of inexplicably losing balance and feeling dizzy: "I have an experience—and I am not joking when I say that it is a seasickness on dry land" (cited in Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 126). After describing very specifically that the cause of the disease is loading too many things onto one's consciousness, the narrator starts listing them:

> Communal lunacy is growing and thriving in the country—you know this as well as I do [...]. People get irritated saying that the aim is joining the 21st century but on the road the temple-mosque [Babri Masjid], Suba Gurudwara and personal law debates [Shah Bano case] are all hindrances. (83)

Having stressed that the load he is carrying is connected to the two main issues confronting Indian Muslims in the 1980s (the diegetic time of the novel), namely the Babri Masjid and Shah Bano case, the narrator connects them to the war between Iran and Iraq, the war in Afghanistan, the civil war in Lebanon and the on-going fighting between Israelis and Palestinians as part of the same problem: "It seems as if all these [conflicts] are swaying like a tree from root to top in the

same storm, and humans are forced to live with all these changes on this same land under this same sky" (84). This passage lies at the heart of this thesis. The narrator is saying that all these struggles have a common cause and that they are driven by similar forces. Obviously every struggle has its specific causes and history, but here they are all brought together through shared dealing with the ebb and flow of ideas and their consequences, namely that the Indian Muslim, as a Muslim, cannot but be directly affected by these conflicts, wherever they are being fought.

Here the tree is swaying but still alive, unlike the dead, dried-out tree of *Sūkhā bargad* (*A Dying Banyan,* 1986), which is the focus of the next chapter.[44] *Sūkhā bargad* shares many similarities with *Dāstān e lāpatā* as it too tells the story of struggling Muslim protagonists in Bhopal.

After this passage dealing with different conflicts around the globe, the narrator moves on to describe Bhopal specifically: "While agreeing with all this, I would like to say one more thing. The real city of Bhopal is in bad shape today and is the victim of confusion" (84). Then he goes on to say that this is not because of the 1984 gas tragedy, even though it was undoubtedly terrible:[45]

> He [the *lāpatā*] is alienated by everything in the world [...] and the gas tragedy takes precedence on his list. What I myself am pointing to are the processions of religious groups showing off their own unity and strength in order to strike fear into the hearts of other religious groups. This has become the culture of this city and country. (84)

[44] Chapter Five discusses the final scene of *Apavitra ākhyān* by Abdul Bismillah, which has the Muslim protagonist burst into tears of relief under a tree in the village after being treated like a family member by Hindus, thus showing how trees are a common metaphor for the Ganga-Jamuni culture.

[45] The Bhopal gas disaster occurred in December 1984 and caused numerous deaths and injuries (estimates vary between 3000-8000 deaths). It is considered one of the worst industrial disasters in global history. For more, see Broughton.

Here, communal tension takes precedence over the gas leak accident as the most pressing issue of the time. This communal tension is fuelled by both Hindus and Muslims staging processions demanding either the protection of the Babri mosque or the freeing of Ram's birthplace:

> Gathering my scattered thoughts, I would like to briefly say that, although the characters in the novel are one hundred per cent fictional, I have tried as an author to make them feel as if they were part of the world surrounding us. The protagonist was tormented by some unknown forces. It is also possible that he himself was the main cause of his own torment. (85)

The pressures exerted on minority characters are often self-generated. They end up being their own worst enemy, since the system that oppresses them is so opaque that they can only reproach or attack themselves. In the absence of systematic, uniform, institutionalized discrimination, there are individuals who belong to minority communities who succeed, and they serve as a sign to others that their failure has less to do with their minority status than with their own personal problems and choices:

> Zamir Ahmed Khan was a very sensitive and emotional man who, instead of understanding things and then compromising in order to move forward, toppled over on the spot. The harmony he had once enjoyed between his head and his heart was ruined forever. From then on, whenever he did work that demanded thinking, compromise and forward planning—all those actions which bring satisfaction—it was as if he was taking revenge on himself over something. There was every possibility of serious damage in these actions, and indeed that is what happened. (161)

This description of self-sabotage is critical, and it also gives us a key to understanding the behaviour of the two protagonists in *Sūkhā bargad*. This type of self-inflicted harm is reminiscent of some of Kafka's characters' curious behaviour, such as the protagonist in *The Trial*, who acts as his own prosecutor

(or is it presecuter in the case of Minor Literature?). According to the "strong rewriting" suggested by the insistence in reading the political underpinnings in Minor Literature, these characters respond to subliminal pressures in their societies by turning on themselves.

The introduction closes with an enigmatic joke which sums up the confusion between all the characters involved.

> All these characters that you have been introduced to, or will be introduced to in the future, are all basically my own capital (*sarmāyā*), which the *lāpatā* Bhopali enjoys the interest (*sūd*) of. Is my meaning clear? No? So come and I'll tell you a story.
>
> A paranoid person hung a string around his neck to recognize himself so that he wouldn't get lost among people. Some joker came to know of his craziness, and while the paranoid person was sleeping took the string and hung it around his own neck. When the paranoid person awoke, he saw that his string was on another person's neck. He said, "Sir, if you are me, then who am I? Am I you or are you are? Or are you you and I am I?! Tell me, who am I?!"
>
> My relationship with Zamir Ahmed Khan and the *lāpatā* Bhopali is somewhat like this. Sometimes being able to say who's who feels like the world's hardest question. (85)

This story demonstrates how Ahtesham, when ostensibly explaining his confusion as an author, seems unwilling, or perhaps unable, to create clear boundaries, thus leaving the readers to decide how to read his fictional or semi-fictional narrative alter egos.

The second intervention in the book reads differently from the first. Here, in the last third of the novel, Ahtesham writes a detailed historical analysis of minor political events in the 1960s and 1970s, such as the national elections and the corruption of the political system, promising to get back to the narrative and "go and search for whatever we want wherever we want after this short preface" (157). Ahtesham tries to find a different angle from which to understand the

source of dissatisfaction and even despair woven into Zamir's personality. "Perhaps in the very formation of his character there is the mark of a remnant of regret at the nation's losses and gains of achieving independence" (161).

Here we have the clearest indication of how closely Zamir and his *lāpatā* are connected to the nation and its problems. Before returning to discuss the *lāpatā,* Ahtesham says that "it is indisputable that both [man and society] are an image and a reflection of each other" (160). The *lāpatā* draws attention to the failures of Indian independence, and the fact that he is a Muslim makes him all the more sensitive to the failures and the broken dreams. This admission by Ahtesham shows how porous the boundary is between personal and national or the individual and the political and forces us to read *Dāstān e lāpatā* on several levels at the same time.

Apart from Zamir, there are a number of characters in *Dāstān e lāpatā* who can also be read as representatives of the threats of minorityhood. I shall turn to them in the next section.

8 The Mute Speaker

After the blind Murshad, we are introduced to Zamir's cousin Kalim, commonly referred to as Apyeya, a character who has an even worse affliction, an inability to communicate. Apyeya is evoked in Zamir's mind in a mixture of soul-searching and a desperate attempt to discover the root of his problems. We are told that while he was growing up Zamir had an older cousin named Kalim whom everyone called Apyeya, as he was deaf and dumb and kept on producing the sound "*apyeya*". As children, Zamir and his other cousins used alternately to play with Apyeya and pick on him, include and exclude him according to their whims. Apyeya had no say in the matter, was unable to express himself, and never fully understood the situation. He was a key figure in Zamir's life: "Kalim bhai, Apyeya was not any minor character. He was such

a part of Zamir's life that it would be unimaginable and meaningless to write his biography without him" (45). This admission by the narrator of Apyeya's importance for the narrative is striking and is best understood through Alex Woloch's differentiation between "character space", or the lines devoted to describing a character, and the character's importance to the story:

> The minor character stands out because the writer has done a lot with a little: illuminated that one scene, those few lines, that one pivotal moment in which the character appears. (Woloch 40)

Even though descriptions of Apyeya take up little space in the novel, he nonetheless serves an important role in shaping Zamir's life and self-understanding.

The significance of Apyeya's muteness is emphasized when we recall that the meaning of the name Kalim is "speaker."[46] Why is it that his deaf and mute cousin had such a lasting effect on Zamir and is so powerfully evoked? Is there some semi-conscious identification between Zamir and his cousin? When remembering Apyeya, "Zamir Ahmed Khan always started exhaling a cold breath from the cellar of his chest and felt as if the surrounding temperature dropped by a degree or two" (44). The fact that Apyeya was bullied by Zamir and his cousins is now presented as a possible source of his current curse:

> Now, if Dr Crocodile laughs without understanding Zamir Ahmed Khan's disease, or if a performance or dance [physical convulsions] gives relief, what's wrong with that! If one has the courage to laugh at the world, then one should have the ability to laugh at oneself. It is not true that mutes don't have tongues. Can't curses come out of Apyeya's mouth? [...] Whenever he remembered Apyeya, it was always accompanied with shock and regret. (51)

[46] Asghar Wajahat reiterates the importance of minor characters when he calls Apyeya "a character whose impact remains with the reader forever" ("*Dāstān e madhyavarg*", 45).

Is this a case in which Zamir is cast in the role of the able-bodied majority and is now consumed by guilt for being insensitive to Apyeya's plight? He feels as though his present condition is a direct result of his hard-heartedness or childish cruelty towards the defenseless and voiceless Apyeya. Only now, when he himself is desperately frustrated at being unable to fathom his disease and convince others of the reality of his suffering, does the image of Apyeya's "shining eyes, which had animal like attentiveness as well as sadness," haunt him (45). Zamir asks himself what is wrong with Dr Crocodile's laughter, since he knows from experience that it is impossible to understand or sympathize with someone else's suffering without first-hand knowledge of suffering oneself. As in the description of the interaction between Zamir and Dr Crocodile, the expression of frustration, of the impossibility of explaining one's experience or shifting someone's point of view, is a central part of the condition of being a minority.

Another reason why Apyeya is so important is that he suggests the threat of a minority losing its voice in the major language. Apyeya's continuous repetition of the sound "*apyeya*" is so powerful that it also becomes his name. Sound with no meaning or language without comprehension is the reason why Zamir feels a chill of terror when he remembers Apyeya. Viewed through the perspective of minor literature, the minor individual or group is always in a state of fear of losing its voice, and Apyeya signifies the dire consequences of this eventuality. The cousins used to love playing cops and robbers, and Apyeya would always get cast in the role of the villain, despite his protests. The only way he could assert himself was by ignoring the policemen's imaginary bullets raining down on him with "silent laughter" (48). How the game turned out was always dependent on him—whether he was caught easily or was killed or merely wounded all depended on his mood (48). This might express the way minorities are forced to participate in their own marginalization.

Another game is described in great detail in which Apyeya was again the star actor. This pastime sounds like a children's game that recreates Plato's cave:

> In those days, apart from "cops and robbers", everybody's favourite game was playing "cinema" in the outer room of the big house. In this too Apyeya took the main role […]. This room became what in the real cinema is the projector—that is, it casts shadows on the screen. Anyone crossing the room from outside casts their shadow on the wall through the hole in the door, and because of the lenses' faults their shape was distorted. On the screen of the room, left or right, the shadow's real shape went in the opposite direction, and the image used to remain till the shape was out of range. (49-50)

This game took place in summer when it was too hot to play outside. Apyeya would get cajoled into stepping into the fierce heat and would make shapes that cast the strangest shadows and delight the children. Every time he wanted to take a break and would collapse sweating on the floor, the children would do everything they could to get him to repeat his antics. Apyeya's centrality to the children's activities also represents the position of the minority community vis-à-vis the majority. That is, by standing out, he allows all the other children to come together, united by the fact that, unlike him, they are not deaf and dumb. The ambivalence in the relationship, represented by the need of the children for Apyeya to perform all the time as a reminder of his difference, coupled with the fact that he is an object of ridicule, reproduces something of the relationship between minority and majority. The game of casting shadows hints at one of the main threads in the novel, namely reality and its representation, the self and its shadow self. It also serves as a prolepsis for the two chapters entitled "The Cave", in which the characters discuss the outside world in a play on Plato's parable.

9 The Cave

In the chapter entitled *Gufā* or "Cave", Zamir Ahmed Khan spends time drinking with unnamed drinking buddies in an underground bar called *Gufā.* This is where the only political discussions or arguments portrayed in *Dāstān e lāpatā* occur, that is, out of sight in the cave or underground. From the language they use (*k̲h̲udā hāfiz, kāfir, momin* etc.) and from their discussion of the state of Islam and Muslim nations, it seems that most if not all the unnamed participants in the drinking sessions are Muslims. These discussions are in direct contrast to the rhetoric of political activists. The characters in the *gufā* do not shape policies and trends but are rather on their receiving end. Their discussions are not about practical ways to change the system but attempt to understand its intricacies and vent their frustration about it.

Earlier, Zamir and his cousins played with Apyeya, projecting images on the wall similar to Plato's parable of the cave. Here we have the drinkers sitting underground like the prisoners inside the cave, unable to distinguish between reality and projection. The mixture of irony, humor and genuine confusion reminds us of Zamir himself, even though he is not directly quoted in the discussions. The underground setting and the alcohol also blur the line between serious speech and banter, and it is up to the reader to decide how to interpret what the men are discussing.

The beginning of the chapter consists of two and a half pages of free indirect discourse in which we do not know who is speaking and how many speakers there are.[47] There is no narrator and it is as if we were sitting in the bar listening to the conversation. The focus of the discussions is on Indian and

[47] The *Glossary of Literary Terms* defines free indirect discourse as "the way, in many narratives, that the reports of what a character says and thinks shift in pronouns, adverbs, and grammatical mode, as we move—or sometimes hover—between the direct narrated reproductions of these events as they occur to the character and the indirect representation of such events by the narrator" (Harpham and Abrams, 169).

world politics and they display a strong Muslim standpoint. We are in the present of the novel (1987) and not in one of the flashbacks. For example:

> "The situation here keeps changing in the same way; it's the same reaction that's happening in the name of Islam all over the world."
> "And what about Gorbachev's doings?"
> "In a way that is also a link in this chain."
> "Iran wants to become the leader of the Muslim world at any price."
> "The basic fight is between Shias and Sunnis."
> "Do you think there is a lack of Shia population in Iraq?"
> "It would be more correct to call it a fight between Arabs and non-Arab Muslims."
> "Yes, the Iranians are proudly calling themselves Aryans these days."
> "Fire-worshippers!"
> [...]
> "Did you not learn anything from them?"
> "What?"
> "Say it with pride—we are Hindus!" (86)

After a brief survey of international affairs and the Iran–Iraq war, in which some speakers talk seriously and some respond with irony, the discussion shifts towards events closer to home and to more pressing issues:

> "When in Rome, one must live like a Roman."
> "You live like a Roman; let us live according to our own society's way of thinking."
> "Soon communism will come here chanting Ram Ram."
> "Who knows when?"
> "It will come now! Because it is being pushed out of Europe and Russia these days."
> "Like old weapons and expired medicine!"
> "We ourselves will welcome it with open arms."
> "In the current state in India! When the drums of personal law and the Babri Masjid are beating?"
> "Today even television is not television anymore. It has become a propaganda machine for ancient times. They have even started a competition between the gods!" (87)

The lack of a narrator allows unmediated access to the drinkers' conversation, with its mixture of irony and sense of an oppressive political climate. No idea is really dwelt upon, and all that happens is that thoughts are thrown into the air as if for relief rather than for serious discussion. The Babri Masjid and the Shah Bano case (referred to as personal law) were the defining issues for Indian Muslims in the 1980s, and the prevailing mood in the *gufā* is one of despair. The discussions about Muslims in India keep repeating themselves, and no one recognizes the boundary between jokes and serious utterances, or thinks whether it exists at all in this desperate state:

> "Why don't you present your formula to the citizens of the state?"
> "I've done it so many times, but you gentlemen think it's a joke."
> "Tell us one more time..."
> "Now Muslims should demand a unified India (*akhand bhārat)*. A state which includes Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal etc."
> "What will happen after that?"
> "There will be no room for an attitude such as yours!" (87)

An India that includes all the above-mentioned states will be an India where Muslims will no longer be a minority. By calling it *akhand bhārat*—undivided India—the speaker uses the same language as the Hindu right, and by doing so he creates confusion between ideologies, exposing the emptiness of their slogans. The Hindu right does dream or at least claim to want a "unified India," but obviously in this vision of an undivided India, India would not have a Hindu majority anymore. Or is the speaker exposing the fact that, when the Hindu right talk of a unified India, they are implicitly calling for ethnic cleansing? The dark side of nationalism that is rarely discussed appears here in the primordial fears of the minority.

The chapter ends with the same mixture of seriousness and banter, but the tone shifts and becomes darker:

> "So you think," the speaker said, bringing a tone of seriousness to the subject, "that it is a fact that what happened in 1947 was a mistake?"
> "What do we know, man" (*yār*), someone said in a mocking voice; "We weren't exactly adults back then!"
> Another round of loud laughter.
> Talk. Some of the subjects were real enough, but in order to spend the time pleasantly no one addressed them seriously. Anyway, these days expressing criticism of religious reactionaries outside this forum had stopped. Day by day there were increasing worries, and a sense of danger hung in the air. The tension of an unclear future. Apart from Zamir Ahmed Khan's personal cellar (*talghar*), a large part of the world's cellars were aware of partition and the changes happening around. (89-90)

The ending of the chapter connects Zamir's *talghar* with the wider one. We can call it Zamir's unconscious and its connection to the collective unconscious of the people around him. Stark points out that Zamir "occasionally changes this place [his apartment which is his 'upper underground'] for another underground retreat, a shabby club with the suggestive name 'Gufa', 'cave', where he and like-minded fellow spirits spend their evenings sinking into alcoholic stupor" (477). The *gufā* is an extension of Zamir's underground/unconscious, but also a place where he can connect with others who suffer from similar existential and political anxieties. Jung's term the "collective unconscious" refers to archetypes shared by all humans, but here, following Jameson's suggestion of an unconscious shaped by the political forces in play in the context of the text, it is interesting to think of a shared unconscious among oppressed groups. Rather than the collective unconscious being a primordial remnant, here it is a result of the continuous subliminal and overt messages that the minorities receive in the public sphere. As we shall see in the next section, Zamir often experiences difficulties when he is outside. This is another reason that, as his disease progresses, he is increasingly unwilling or unable to leave his house.

10 On the Open Road: The Threat of Public Spaces

Zamir wanders through the streets of Bhopal after he storms out of Dr Crocodile's clinic and thinks about all the changes around him and how fast people and vehicles are moving. He walks the streets repeating to himself "like a mantra" that "nothing is ever stable" (17). Alongside this mantra, he mulls over the fact that Dr Crocodile chose to open his clinic in an area dominated by graveyards. He then recalls that, on the day of redemption (*"kayāmat kā din"*), it is said that from every grave thousands of dead people will rise (17). This mixture of Hindu references (*mantra*) and the Islamic reference to the day of redemption is characteristic of Ahtesham's writing; the references blend together seamlessly, as both ideas are familiar to Hindi speakers.

These allusions are just one example of the way in which Ahtesham continuously re-inscribes Muslim culture into an Indian culture which recognizes it but is in the process of regarding it as foreign, external and not autochthonous. Ahtesham's mixture of Hindi and Urdu words, and especially the way some Muslim characters parody the purification process, as in the example of invoking the Hindutva term *akhand bhārat* described above, are all part of this resistance to being marginalized and seeing Indo-Islamic history sidelined.

Nasira Sharma uses a similar mixture of Muslim and Hindu references (see Chapter Four), but she focuses on the blending and meeting points of Islam and Hinduism, whereas in *Dāstān e lāpatā* Ahtesham does not challenge the separation between the two religions. In fact, religion itself is unimportant for Zamir. For example, once he acquires the taste for alcohol he becomes a regular drinker and suffers no guilt while drinking. Zamir's religious identity only serves to mark him as different from the majority, and unlike the protagonists of *Sūkhā bargad* and *Pārijāt*, he does not find solace in religion.

Apart from allusions to religious elements, Zamir experiences public space as threatening and overwhelming: "Cars, scooters, three wheelers, buses, trucks, bicycles, horse-drawn tongas and pedestrians facing each other and advancing like two enemy armies pouncing on each other" (18). The menace that Zamir perceives everywhere and the way everything seems to be colliding shows how sensitive he is and how hard it is for him to face the outside world, with its fast pace and aggression. A few pages later, still wandering through the streets, he notices "a jeep with a fluttering saffron flag driving along the road announcing a public assembly somewhere. On the other side of the road some people were fighting with an auto rickshaw driver" (21). This reference to the Ramjanmabhumi movement represented by the jeep with the saffron flag might easily be lost among other details had the book not ended with the enigmatic postscript detailing the terror after the Babri Masjid demolition, which is described at the end of this chapter.

Zamir continues walking along the road and observing the changes everywhere while he reflects on his failures in life. Suddenly he is overtaken by a bout of his disease: "The flashes between light and shade in his mind happened so fast that he felt he would faint and fall if he didn't immediately support himself somehow" (22). An auto-rickshaw driver recognizes that he is in distress and takes him home, thus saving him. Zamir's disease is so advanced that he is incapable of undertaking simple activities such as walking down the street without the fear of falling. Yet the source of the disease is never spelt out, always remaining in a suggestive haze. Is it his over sensitivity which makes him see the bad everywhere, or is he prescient and sees the growing violence and terror about to sweep North India? How do Ahtesham's contemporaries read *Dāstān e lāpatā*, and how do they interpret his disease?

11 Language Issues and the Reception of *Dāstān e lāpatā*

The reviews of *Dāstān e lāpatā* are a useful starting point for discussing both Ahtesham's use of language in the novel and its reception by critics. As a Muslim writing in Hindi, Ahtesham cannot escape his language being scrutinized for signs of Muslimness. Harish Trivedi's English-language review is a perfect example of the environment in which Ahtesham's novels are received. Rather than deal with the novel on its own terms and its implicit and explicit criticism of the treatment of Muslims, Trivedi focuses on Ahtesham's Muslim identity and finds ways to patronize him from his position of power as a Hindu:

> Finally, such have been the conditions of Muslim–Hindu coexistence in north India in our time that the language in which one writes about them becomes itself part of the subject matter. The Hindi that Ehtesham writes is on the whole so fluent and idiomatic, and so subtly and variously flavored, to be a source of constant relish [...]. However, it is in his occasional determination to show that he knows heavily Sanskritized Hindi as well as the next fellow that Manzoor Ehtesham betrays himself as basically an Urdu writer writing in Hindi. (31)

The tone of Harish Trivedi's review is condescending, and he chooses to focus on minor aspects, rather than on *Dāstān e lāpatā*'s subversive character. Moreover, Trivedi makes a telling mistake when he insists that the character's name is "Zamir Ehmad [not Ahmad] Khan" (30). We know from the first chapter that Zamir is different since Dr Crocodile, in a classic moment of majoritarian authority, laughs at him for his name going from Z-A rather than A-Z. Ahtesham merely uses a different style of transliteration here. Trivedi's overlooking of this point is in line with his reading of the novel. Rather than dealing with the obvious expressions of despair regarding the marginalization of Muslims, Trivedi cooperates with this "othering" by ridiculing the spelling or transliteration of Ahtesham's name on the book cover:

> As poetic retribution perhaps [for his use of high Hindi], his publishers have misprinted Ehtesham's own name on the dust-jacket, the title-page and even the copyright by-line (but not as it happens on the back flap), as not Manzoor but *Manjoor*, as a small price he must presumably pay for writing in Hindi without-the bindi. *Kyon bhai Manzoor, manjoor hai?* (31)

By punning his name and taunting him about having to work in an environment which is actively trying to erase the traces of his community's heritage, Trivedi effectively excludes Ahtesham from the fold of Hindi writers and marks him out as special. The removal of the *bindi* is no joke: it is a clear top-down decision aimed at "purifying" or at least obfuscating the influence and heritage of languages such as Urdu and Farsi.[48] Yet Trivedi chooses to address this issue as a joke rather than confronting the difficulties of a Muslim author writing in Hindi and his attempts to be treated as an equal. Zamir Ahmed Khan's name, like Manzoor Ahtesham's own name, is not written easily in Hindi, since both include sounds which the Devanagari script does not have in its original Sanskrit form. The question of Ehtesham (as Trivedi writes it) and Ehmad, as opposed to Ahtesham and Ahmed, or Manjoor-Manzoor, or Jamir-Zamir, is much more than simply a quibble about spelling. It is about making space in a system which lacks the correct signs in both letters and symbolic space for Muslims in India writing in Hindi. Ahtesham highlights his own experience by choosing to give his protagonist a name that shares these difficulties.

Furthermore, Trivedi deals with the Hindi–Urdu divide in a way that obfuscates the reciprocal processes inherent in the nationalization of Hindi and Urdu in India and Pakistan respectively. He writes:

[48] For more information, see Ahmad (259–84).

> Urdu arose as a medium for literary expression and most Muslim (as well as some Hindu) writers preferred to write in it, until the politicization of Urdu and its adoption as a major plank for the separatist demand for Partition led to its elevation (and migration?) as the national language of Pakistan. (30)

Surprisingly, Trivedi does not talk of the politicization, or nationalization, of Hindi and the difficult position that Muslims occupy within it as a result of this process.

It is important to stress that not all reviewers have treated Ahtesham in this way. In a positive review of *Dāstān e lāpatā,* the prominent Hindi critic Vijay Bahadur Singh writes:

> While describing Muslim families and societies, Manzoor introduced a lot of Hindi words that neither us critics, nor other writers who claim proximity with Hindi-Urdu are familiar with. From this point of view too, this novel is very important. (112)

Singh flags up the way in which Ahtesham enriches Hindi by using the tension between Hindi and Urdu to challenge and refresh the boundaries of Hindi. Deleuze and Guattari theorize Singh's insight:[49]

> Even when it is unique, a language remains a mixture, a schizophrenic mélange, a Harlequin costume in which very different functions of language and distinct centers of power are played out, blurring what can be said and what can't be said. (26)

These formulations help us locate Ahtesham's work in a larger scheme of political power and its relationship with language. To paraphrase Singh, by "introducing" new words into Hindi, Ahtesham keeps the "centers of power"

[49] In the same context, Jameson writes: "Just so, in our time, the vernacular and its still vital source of production (as in black language) are reappropriated by the exhausted and media-standardized speech of a hegemonic middle class" (87).

of language constantly shifting, reminding the reader of the "schizophrenic mélange" that is often hidden in the language of non-minor authors. Ahtesham's usage exposes the way formal or standardized Hindi works to marginalize and obfuscate its Urdu influences. The position of being a Muslim writing in Hindi allows or perhaps forces him to fight against an asphyxiated language by drawing upon Hindi's joint history with Urdu.

Asghar Wajahat, in his 1996 review of *Dāstān e lāpatā,* also focuses primarily on Ahtesham's use of Hindi. His approach, which is also apparent in his fiction (Chapter Three), is that the divergence between Hindi and Urdu is so small that there is no need to make an effort either to differentiate or conversely to bridge the gap between them:

> I don't know whether Ahtesham used to write in Urdu or not. But it is clear that his mother tongue is Urdu and that he writes in Hindi. Here and there in the text he presents the beauty of Hindi and Urdu. Sometimes it feels that some of his characters speak difficult Hindi that does not fit their natural speech. How would you feel if a middle-class educated Muslim housewife would say: "This decision hasn't been made as a reaction to one thing or event, therefore it is irreversible." [*yah faislā maiṁne kisī ek bāt yā ghaṭnā kī pratikriyā meṃ nahīṁ kiyā hai, isliye ise badal pānā bhī sambhav nahīṁ hai*] This type of speech sounds odd. It feels that perhaps Manzoor thinks that the gap between Hindi and Urdu is so deep that in the place of Urdu words he has to use Hindi ones. ("*Dāstān e madhyavarg*", 46)

It is important to emphasize that Wajahat fails to register the subversive potential of Ahtesham's language choices. To reiterate the point made in the introduction, Ahtesham, by virtue of being a Muslim author writing in Hindi, can use Hindi and flag up its artifice at the same time. He thus deterritorializes Hindi's exclusionary, "purifying" tendencies and reterritorializes it with a register that argues for a diffuse genealogy in which there is no one dominant source. Every word choice can be read as either a natural choice or a political statement. The power of Ahtesham's writing is that he does not resolve this

question, thus the two possibilities continue to exist side by side. In the words of prominent Hindi author Uday Prakash, this is "a novel which is a message for the majority" (83).

At the end of his review, Vijay Bahadur Singh says that while reading *Dāstān e lāpatā* the urge arises to ask: "Zamir Ahmed Khan, why are you so meek, innocent and lonely? Surely this cannot be your and your community's destiny?" (113). Perhaps by exposing the frailties of his protagonist and the fragility of his position, Ahtesham allows his message to filter silently into Hindi-language literature.

12 Conclusion

The final section of *Dāstān e lāpatā* stands out from the rest of the novel in its dramatic tone as a cessation, and perhaps completion, of the search for the self which is at the core of the novel. The somber tone suggests both loss and failure. The sirens and the threat of mass violence hanging in the air, a reference to the demolition of the Babri Masjid, are proof that Zamir's disease was real and that his loss of balance wasn't an internal problem but rather a premonition of the ground shaking under the feet of India's Muslims.[50] Ahtesham wrote *Dāstān e lāpatā* between 1991-95 during the height of the Ramjanmabhumi movement and its bloody aftermath, yet the novel is set before these events occur.[51]

The tone at the beginning of the postscript (*upsanhār*, which can also mean "the final destruction") is so different that the reader immediately senses that something has changed.

[50] In the days after the demolition more than a hundred people died in Madhya Pradesh, the majority of them in Bhopal. For a detailed description, see Peoples Union for Democratic Rights. Also, see Christophe Jaffrelot and Shazia Aziz Wülber's essay on Muslims in Bhopal, in which they give a detailed description of the involvement of the police and politicians in the riots (170-172).

[51] The dates of writing were given during an interview with the author (Bhopal, February 2016).

> December 1992
> The silence spread far and wide. Silence and the sound of police cars patrolling the streets. Along with the expansion and contraction of the heart, the fear of something happening was in the air. (243-244)

The novel ends with a funeral procession that carries an empty coffin. The narrator explains that during his childhood he would attend this type of funeral with his father when a notable Muslim had died somewhere far away and the locals wanted to pay their respects (244-45). This ending brings the novel full circle, as the first character to be introduced was Murshad, who slept in the bier's storage room in the mosque. In the symbolic funeral procession, which serves as a mute demonstration against the horrors of the riots, the narrator tries to free himself from the rows of praying men with the excuse that he does not know how to pray. A nameless hand pulls him in and silences his remonstrations (245). The narrator's attempts not to identify as a Muslim end in failure, and without making a conscious choice he is included in the fold of Muslims in the most symbolic form of the rows of praying men:

> Again I wanted to escape among those who weren't praying and who were gathered in condolence. Allah Akbar! The sound arrived, and my hands, as if on their own, raised themselves to my ears and then rested on my chest. Forgetting everything, I became a part of the funeral procession for the unnamed dead. (245)

This affirmation of religious identity on the part of the narrator is crucial. Religion becomes a quiet haven in these tumultuous times. Hence, after all the doubts and tensions, religion, or perhaps community, is still the most stable and powerful force. This choice of ending raises the question of whether this funeral procession is the funeral of the secular state? Or perhaps of the pre-partition joint culture? Does the narrator's joining in the prayer symbolize the end of

individual secular identity? The novel leaves these questions open with a sense of mounting urgency.

In conclusion, we can say that *Dāstān e lāpatā* is a novel that destabilizes every theme it touches on. Identity and narrative are fragmented, while the borders between fiction and non-fiction are continuously challenged. This is the "symbolic solution" to the goal of representing the tectonic shifts on the levels of society, state and city. Deleuze and Guattari claim that Minor Literature "forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics." This claim rings true in the light of the representation of Zamir Ahmed Khan's psyche (17). His troubled mind, with its ever-present *lāpatā* shadow part, is an individual expression of the damage wrought by a political atmosphere which pushes Muslims to the side, removing their agency in the shaping of public life around them. Through its non-linear narrative, *Dāstān e lāpatā* attempts to express the result of falling outside the dominant narrative of the nation.

The next chapter focuses on Manzoor Ahtesham's earlier novel *Sūkhā bargad* (1986), which centres on the story of two siblings with similar life trajectories to Zamir Ahmed Khan's. But while Zamir Ahmed Khan is obviously ill, and while defeat in the face of society is part of *Dāstān e lāpatā* from the beginning, in *Sūkhā bargad* the position in society of the two protagonists is more ambiguous. Unlike Zamir, who spends his days in endless introspection, they fight for what they believe is right.

Chapter Two: Toward A Minor *Bildungsroman*?

> All of a sudden the walls of our house contracted. The newly cleaned and ordered city left us behind. The door and walls of the house had been in need of a whitewash for a long time. Outside the unrelenting traffic increased. Suhail rarely left the house.
>
> Manzoor Ahtesham (*Sūkhā bargad*, 170)

1 Introduction

Sūkhā bargad (*A Dying Banyan*, 1986), Manzoor Ahtesham's second novel, tells the story of two siblings from a Muslim family, Rashida and Suhail, coming of age against the backdrop of the post-independence decades.[52] The novel is narrated by Rashida and describes the struggle to maintain a secular Muslim identity in an environment that interpellates Muslims in the role of a religious minority. This chapter examines the way in which the protagonists' minority position influences their lives even before the rise of Hindutva as a major political force. Having seen the devastating effects of minoritization on Zamir, the protagonist of Ahtesham's later novel *Dāstān e lāpatā*, it will be easier for the reader to follow the contours of this process as it is reflected in Rashida and Suhail. The novel traces the protagonists' development from childhood during Bhopal's transition from a Muslim majority city into the capital of the new state of Madhya Pradesh and the influx of non-Muslims this brings with it.[53] Educated by both a staunchly secular father and a deeply religious and traditional mother, Rashida and Suhail negotiate their friendships and romantic

[52] The novel was translated into English by Kuldip Singh as *A Dying Banyan* (2005).

[53] For a detailed look at Bhopal's changing demographics and their influence on the Muslim community there, see "Bhopal Muslims: Besieged in the Old City?" by Jaffrelot and Wülbers in *Muslims in Indian Cities*. For example: "The population of the city tripled in 20 years, jumping from 102,333 in 1951 to 298,022 in 1971" (163). Moreover, in 1941 Muslims were 63 percent of the population, while by 1971 they had declined to 38.5 percent (170).

relationships with Hindus through the two different prisms of parental influence. The narrative allows us to track and register the subtle shifts in Muslim–Hindu relations and internal Muslim relations as the majoritarian "Hinduness" of India's secularism is revealed in different moments.

In order to trace the connections between the formation of the individual and the national, and following Deleuze and Guattari's insistence on "the connection of the individual to a political immediacy", this chapter is divided into six sections which all trace the different manifestations or expressions of minoritization in the novel. The first section (a) focuses on the *Bildung* of Rashida and Suhail, that is, the way in which they are socialized. It argues that the trajectory of their failed lives is best understood through J. R. Slaughter's notion of "the dissensual *Bildungsroman*", a kind of *Bildungsroman* in which the protagonists are unable to develop individually according to their own desires since the public sphere around them is dysfunctional. The following section (b) focuses on the centrality of the father–child relationship in Minor Literature. I show how the conflation between the authority of the state and that of the father figure radically disrupts the family unit. I then explore (c) the link between the descriptions of the accelerated development that occurred in Bhopal and the inner world of the protagonists and show how the changing cityscape creates a deep-seated feeling of alienation and destabilization resulting in the fear of falling off the map into oblivion. The fourth section (d) examines interpellation, that is, the way in which the protagonists' surroundings, such as the education system and the messages they receive through the media—what Louis Althusser (2001) calls Ideological State Apparatuses—prescribe an identity which maintains a certain degree of "othering" of Muslims. Linking this to Aamir Mufti's argument, we can say that Muslims are interpellated as a minority as an integral part of creating a distinct Indian national identity (see Introduction). Furthermore (e), I examine the role of cross-communal friendships and relationships in delineating the fault lines in

the public sphere, showing how dialogue does not always help in reaching an understanding. Finally (f), the last section focuses on Rashida, who is the most developed female character in all the novels examined in this thesis. I explore the additional pressures piled onto Muslim women, who exist as a kind of "minor within the minor".

2 What kind of *Bildung*?

> When we remember that the *Bildungsroman*—the symbolic form that more than any other has portrayed and promoted modern socialization—is also the *most contradictory* of modern symbolic forms, we realize that in our world socialization itself consists first of all in the *interiorization of contradiction*. The next step being not to 'solve' the contradiction, but rather to learn to live with it, and even transform it into a tool for survival.
>
> Franco Moretti (*The Way of the World,* 10, emphasis in original)

The *Bildungsroman* can be translated as novel of formation or of coming of age, describing the development and socialization of an individual into society. Combining Jameson and Moretti, we can talk of the *Bildungsroman* as tracing the way in which social contradictions are symbolically solved by the "interiorization of contradiction." Moretti discusses how socialization in the *Bildungsroman* is predicated on the individual's ability to meet challenges and deal with unfamiliar situations. For Moretti these challenges usually have to do with the contradictions between the old and new order, or between social expectations and individual aspirations. This leads us to ask what happens in novels that are centered on characters growing up in war-torn countries or under oppressive regimes with different sets of contradictions, such as places with a dysfunctional public sphere. J. R. Slaughter, in *Human Rights Inc.* (2007), uses the term "dissensual" for *Bildungsromane* that track the failure of this

transition and incorporation.[54] The dissensual *Bildungsroman* "simultaneously asserts in principle and denies in practice the universality of rights and the abstract equivalence of citizenship" (152).

We can apply Slaughter's theory to what I call here the Minor *Bildungsroman*, since the *Bildungsheld* (protagonist) suffers from the same disparity between promise and reality. This is the core of the tension in *Sūkhā bargad*, as the drama of socialization in the *Bildungsroman* is exacerbated in the Minor *Bildungsroman*: Suhail, and to a lesser extent Rashida, experience an extreme dissonance, in fact a clash between promise and reality. Moreover, their Muslim relatives and Hindu friends are either not interested or are unable to understand the Minor perspective. Suhail enters society brimming with self-confidence and optimism, only to learn that not all is as it seems. While he is surrounded by the discourse of secular equality, he experiences prejudice and is unable to articulate the experience of being snubbed. Suhail fails to strike a balance between society's interpellative demands from him as a Muslim and his own desires. These demands can be described as continuously having to prove one's secularism and allegiance to India, or else to differentiate oneself as belonging to a separate religious group. These impossible demands lead to the dissolution of his relationship with his Hindu friend Vijay, who does not understand Suhail's predicament. Furthermore, Suhail loses faith in cross-community dialogue or any other secular solution. Rashida, mirroring Suhail's struggles, also experiences an inability to negotiate a position between the demands of her traditional Muslim mother and family and between her father's and Hindu friends' expectations that she takes an ideological stand rejecting tradition.

[54] Dissensus here is opposed to consensus, a reference to *Bildungsromane* that deal with disagreement and conflict, rather than reach some sort of agreement and cooperation. See also Ganguly, who has used the term "dissensual *Bildungsroman*" to characterize Dalit autobiographies.

According to Bakhtin, in the classical *Bildungsroman*, the development of the individual subject:

> is no longer man's own private affair. He emerges *along with the world* and he reflects the historical emergence of the world itself. He is no longer within an epoch, but on the border between two epochs, at the transition point from one to another. (1986, 23, emphasis in original)

The novels Bakhtin analyzed were classical European ones in which the protagonists ushered in a new era in Europe. In the case of *Sūkhā bargad*, the first of the two epochs is the period leading up to Independence in the context of Bhopal, which is a mixture of feudal society, symbolized by Suhail and Rashida's mother, and revolutionary zeal, symbolized by their father. The second epoch, the period after Independence, is marked by a clash between ideals and reality and the failures of many of the ideals to take hold in the new nation state. The tensions experienced by Rashida and Suhail as individuals are therefore not just individual problems but larger ones, and the sensitive protagonists are aware of this link.

Already Georg Lukács, in *The Theory of the Novel* (1920), had discussed some of the core tensions within the coming of age novel:

> The type of personality and the structure of the plot are determined by the necessary condition that a reconciliation between interiority and reality, although problematic, is nevertheless possible; that it has to be sought in hard struggles and dangerous adventures, yet it is ultimately possible to achieve. (132)

This formulation raises a fundamental question regarding the Minor or dissensual *Bildungsroman*. Is the reconciliation between interiority and reality possible in Minor Literature? Are the "minor" characters not interpellated into a position which disregards their interiority? The "hard struggles and dangerous adventures" that Ahtesham's protagonists experience occur on the doorsteps of

their houses. Rather than setting forth into the world, they are forced to defend whatever they can of a disappearing mode of social existence. The marginalized position of minorities sets up a whole different paradigm of reconciliation between interiority and external reality. After trying to change the world around them with youthful energy, Rashida and Suhail learn that, unlike their Hindu friends and acquaintances, little space is afforded to them for creating a nuanced position. Both their own Muslim community and their Hindu surroundings posit the narrow options of belonging and individual decisions. Non-adherence poses a threat to Muslim society, which is itself under pressure, but also to Hindu society, which maintains the systematic minoritization of Muslims in order to preserve the boundaries between "us" and "them" and to incorporate Muslims without erasing their "otherness".

The friendship with Vijay shows the limits of the equality offered to Muslims even by Hindus who are sympathetic towards them:

> "But can you deny that Muslims listen to Radio Pakistan on the sly?" Just like this an argument started between Vijay and Suhail one dark night. "What about that? Don't Hindus listen as well?" Suhail flared up. "Hindus don't listen on the sly. The people who listen in hiding are those who are guilty" (*chipkar to vahī suntā hai jo gilṭi ho*). "And those who openly listen do so because they know no one will cast doubts on their loyalty! There isn't enough respect towards the Muslims that they would develop the self-confidence to do so!" (81)

This heated exchange, which happens against the backdrop of the 1971 war with Pakistan, goes on until finally, answering Vijay's question about the difference between Muslims and Hindus in India, Suhail says: "The biggest difference is that Hindus don't have to provide evidence that their country is India!" (82). As this exchange shows, questions of loyalty and guilt are part of minority existence within the nation state. I will return to the relationship between Suhail and Vijay at length later. The point of presenting their exchange

at this stage is to show that Suhail feels that his identity is limited by the demands to explain his actions, while Vijay is free to do as he wishes.

Suhail's realization of his position in society as a representative of a minority group is linked to a crucial part of his self-formation or *Bildung*. Slaughter deftly reveals the symbiotic relationship between individual and national self-formation in the context of the literary form of the novel:

> The novel can be described as a technology for making the institutional abstractions of both the human person and the nation state formation (individually and collectively) sensible. Historically, narrative individualism and narrative nationalism are interdependent, and the modern novel has naturalized their inter-formation within what I have called the Westphalian unities of nation-time and nation-space. (91–92)

Slaughter helps us add the individual dimension to Benedict Anderson's formulations about the formative function of the novel for the "imagined community" of the nation. The foundational stories of the nation are those in which the individual and the state are 'interdependent'; in other words, full *Bildung* can only be achieved within a national narrative, and a national narrative is predicated upon individuals who attain personhood or independence. Yet, in the case of the Minor *Bildungsroman*, we have stories of individuals coming of age within a system or a sphere that does not give space to them as fully developed, right-bearing equal participants in society. Their position of equality might be enshrined in the discourses surrounding them, but in practice their minority identity problematizes the national narrative and is thus side-lined and rendered practically impossible.

The origins of the idea of *Bildung* and the connection between state and individual explain why "minor" characters struggle, and often fail, to achieve a balance between self and society. As Slaughter shows, their trajectory of achieving full personhood is limited since this position is so closely linked to the state's identity, which in turn is predicated on the majority's religion and

culture. Franco Moretti points out that the *Bildungsroman* became central to European culture at the time when modernity put youth at its center: "Youth, or rather the European novel's numerous versions of youth, become for our modern culture the age that holds the 'meaning of life'" (4). This also has to do with the function of youth as representing a new future during the birth of a nation state. Youth is a period of development in which ideology reigns supreme before more worldly concerns or traumas dim the individual's revolutionary energy. This is especially obvious in the life trajectories of Rashida and Suhail, which start with so much promise but decline as they grow older. Moreover, in *Sūkhā bargad* the siblings are expected to respect their elders even when the latter no longer have the ability or experience to guide and support them.

Suhail's behaviour is foreshadowed in his altercation with Phaphu, his kindergarten teacher, in the beginning of the novel, in which Suhail seems to lack the ability to understand or accept complexity in the difference between declared ideology and action. As children Suhail and Rashida are sent for Koranic lessons to a neighbour's house. The neighbour, Phaphu, is a poor widow who ekes out a living by looking after the neighbourhood's children. Suhail and Rashida are prized students since their father is a lawyer and not a laborer like the other children's parents. However, Suhail eventually falls out of favour after his questions expose Phaphu's and society's double standards. For example, Phaphu incessantly rails against unbelievers and refuses to accept modern developments such as photography, likening them to creating graven images, which are *harām*: "Phaphu hated images so much that she blacked out the pictures and film adverts on the newspapers which she used as wallpaper" (18). One day Suhail discovers Phaphu weeping over a photo of her dead husband, and she is so ashamed at having being caught with an image that she tears the picture into shreds (23). After this incident she develops a hatred of Suhail, and he becomes the target of her barbs.

Suhail is described as sensitive and inquisitive from early childhood, unable to accept merely what he is taught, but having to understand the logic behind it. Perhaps in a reference to Partition and his own and the nation's precarious beginnings, Suhail is described as being born prematurely: "at seven months, very weak and every effort was made to save him" (15). His process of socialization is fraught from early on, when we learn that he had the habit of "voicing out loud the questions everyone thinks of silently" (22). This finds an echo in Slaughter's work, when he notes the trouble the protagonist has with the "capacity to sustain ambiguity and complexity," which is the essence of *Bildung* (44).

The moment of crisis, or the inability to reconcile an identity which is the fruit of interiority with the imposed identity which is the result of the structure of society, is a culmination of unresolved tensions regarding the protagonists' Muslim identity in a Hindu majority society. For Suhail this happens when his girlfriend, a Hindu Brahmin girl named Gita Sharma, marries a fellow Hindu in a match organized by her family (99). He feels cheated and never recovers from the blow. The mixture of romantic failure and the sense that his chances have been dashed because of his religious identity create emotions that are too potent for him to handle. His being jilted is the last straw, and his response reflects the wider social tensions within which he is located and which he cannot articulate:

> Then Gita married some other boy, and Suhail's life started falling apart in front of our eyes. During his first two years at college he always finished at the top of his class, but the third-year results took everyone by surprise. Apart from some papers, he failed everything. He didn't even do his practical test, and his exams were terrible. (99)

This is narrated by Rashida, and we do not get direct insight into Suhail's feelings. We can only search for clues in his behaviour. First of all, for weeks he refuses to tell his parents, even though the results were published in the

newspaper and they know he had failed. Finally, when his father confronts him, Suhail explodes and goes on a rant about discrimination against Muslims in his college. At first Suhail sits "silently with his head hanging" while his father gently explains that even the best students fail sometimes and there is nothing to worry about—he can repeat his exams (113). After the father finishes, Suhail keeps sitting there "in the same way and position with his head hanging" as if waiting to say something (114). Finally he tells his father that he wants to quit college. This shocks his father, and after a long back and forth Suhail blurts out, "Anyway the college people won't let me stay!" When the father asks why, Suhail tells him a story of discrimination against Muslims: "You know Professor Raza's story! The same people who can do such injustice to a Muslim head of department by firing him will never give me good grades!" (114-115). The father reminds Suhail that this story is two years old and that the person who ousted Professor Raza was himself a Muslim, but none of this helps, and Suhail is convinced that there are anti-Muslim sentiments in his college. Rashida narrates that "it seemed as if suddenly father was enveloped by a deep anxiety" (116). For the first time the father has a taste of the tensions his son has to face, and a shadow is cast over his vision of the future. That is, the father envisaged, and actively promoted, a society in which Muslim individuals would not suffer from the specter of discrimination.

Ahtesham places Suhail's experience of discrimination or imagined discrimination alongside a number of Muslim characters who flourish and negotiate spaces for themselves without feeling that they have compromised their identity. Yet something about Suhail and Rashida serves as a warning sign of the fault lines for Muslims in a Hindu majority society. For example, Rashida looks at her relative Rehana with "jealousy" and is shocked by the changes she sees in her:

> From a burka-wearing college-going shy girl who had to memorize English words before exams […] she not only spoke English with confidence but with a proper accent […] I couldn't have imagined this change in her. (201)

The success of certain relatives and friends sheds a different kind of light on the failure of Rashida and Suhail's lives. The reasons for their failures in life become increasingly unclear to them. Lukács claims that this confusion touches the core of the *Bildungsroman*:

> The necessary ambiguity [of the search for meaning in the novel] is further increased by the fact that in each separate set of interactions it is impossible to tell whether the inadequacy of the structure of the individual is due to the individual's success or failure or whether it is a comment on the structure itself. (138)

In other words, are Rashida and Suhail themselves the problem, or is their position in society to blame? This ambiguity is one of the main driving forces behind the novel. There is no moment of clear discrimination, and this "ambiguity" remains unresolved. The nature of these feelings is what causes Suhail so much damage. He vacillates between blaming himself and blaming discrimination, as well as alternating between trying to maintain a religious lifestyle and his bouts of drinking. It is impossible to identify the source of Suhail's problems, since his hypersensitivity and the "othering" he experiences are interlinked.

Rashida, on the other hand, fails since she is unwilling or unable to make decisions which would affect her identity and expose her to dilemmas. Instead of marrying Vijay or immigrating to Pakistan for an arranged marriage, after getting a job at the local All India Radio station she postpones all decisions and becomes stranded at home. She spends days in bed wondering "what is it, what is my meaning in this unbridled world which is rushing in an unknown direction and where innocent looking games sometimes end in such

unimaginable ways?" (224). Her reaction to the threat of discrimination is to disengage from the world and minimize her interactions with it to ones which do not challenge her identity. Returning to Slaughter's linking of "narrative individualism and narrative nationalism," we see how she cannot find individual meaning in a world which offers her narrow, non-individual models of social existence (91).

3 Abrahamic Sacrifice and the Father Figure

The father in *Sūkhā bargad* looms large as someone who choses lofty ideals over comfort and social acceptance. His decision to ensure that Rashida and Suhail's education takes place in a co-ed English-medium school sets the course of their lives on a similar track of following one's beliefs notwithstanding social pressures. During Rashida and Suhail's childhood, the father's law practice not only feeds the family but also creates an atmosphere of unwavering belief in justice and the progress of the country. This is subverted later in the novel when the family's financial troubles serve as a reminder of the swift changes occurring in Bhopal and the fact that those wedded to a Gandhian ideology are unable to make a decent living. "Father's earnings were just enough for our daily needs. His black coat became a symbol of protection for us" (95). Yet the father's role as protector is complicated by his lack of action to improve the conditions of the family. Whereas in the early years of Suhail and Rashida's childhood, just after independence, the law is a source of pride and an honorable means of making a living, as the father repeatedly refuses to take lucrative cases which will earn him a good income and takes *pro bono* cases for social causes instead, his insistence impoverishes the household. Their uneducated, more traditional relatives within the wider family become wealthy, whereas Suhail and Rashida's family eke out a living, stuck in the Gandhian-Nehruvian mindset of ideals that the wider society has long since abandoned:

> "How is Mr Lawyer? (*vakīl sahāb*). His [the uncle's] voice was a mixture of irony and mockery—"what historic case is he fighting these days? Our Mr Lawyer doesn't touch any small case, but in life how many big cases occur?" (34).

Alongside this Gandhian behaviour, the father's role is linked from very early on in the novel with the figure of Abraham. One of the first scenes in the novel is a childhood memory of Koranic lessons. The story of Abraham's sacrifice of Ishmael leaves a deep impression on Rashida and Suhail:

> Phaphu's voice delivered us into a striking world. Her droning storytelling tone, as if by magic, caused the scenes to unfold one by one before our eyes [...]. She took us on a journey starting from Ismail's birth all the way to his being sacrificed. (20)

Phaphu, their neighbour and kindergarten teacher mentioned above, vividly describes the story of the sacrifice, extolling Abraham's submission to God and his unquestioning willingness to offer his own son as a sign of true faith. Rashida and Suhail are terror-stricken by the story, and their fear is only abated when they realize that their father is the least religious of all the men they know and thus would not submit blindly to God if he were to demand their sacrifice (20). However, the Koranic story serves as a foreshadowing of the way in which the father sacrifices his children on the altar of the secular nation state. For Suhail, the fact that Ishamel ends up encouraging his father to sacrifice him—"you must sacrifice me (*beshak āp mujhe kurbān karem̐*) […] cover your eyes before putting the knife to my throat so that you won't change your mind"—puts a heavy load of responsibility and the sacrifice becomes as much that of the son as that of the father (20). During their father's last days Suhail writes an assessment of his father's life in his diary. He writes that his father has had a good life and that "he also had the satisfaction of making a sacrifice (*kurbānī*

dene kā sukūn)" (149). The question is whether Suhail is referring to his father's professional integrity or whether this is a reference to the Abrahamic story. That is, perhaps Suhail is referring to his father's relationship with his children. Time after time the father refuses to intervene on behalf of his children, believing that they must negotiate their own way in life. "It's your life, and it's your responsibility to live it according to your own decisions" (71). However, at the same time his ideology causes him to push his children, telling Rashida, for example, when she decides to study journalism: "The biggest role in building or ruining a country is in the hands of the judiciary and the journalists" (95). The father encourages his children to see him as a friend, yet his bearing demands respect, and there is a lack of uninhibited communication between the generations:

> Father was usual as busy with his court cases. In spite of numerous insistences on his side that our relationship was more of friends than of father and daughter, I never managed to feel any friendship in our exchanges […]. Even after his efforts there remained a formality (*adab ahtirām*) between us. (96-97)

While claiming to be open to dialogue, the father's ideology becomes a frozen, permanent fixture, preventing the siblings from negotiating an individual position. The model that the father presents, growing up in the age of the freedom struggle and its ideals, is impossible to follow in the time in which the siblings reach maturity, yet their father seems not to understand this. His belief in secularism and the secular state is as strict as religious belief and has no space for doubt or compromise.

The minority position injects another layer of tension into the father-child relationship. The conflation between the roles of the father as the lawgiver, rule-creating entity alongside the nurturing aspect is problematic for minorities because they can have a fulfilling relationship with their biological fathers but

at the same time feel like unwanted children in the state. Moreover, their real fathers cannot fulfil their roles properly since the tension of minorityhood seeps into the family unit as the father cannot protect his children from the harsh realities outside. Suhail's relationship with his father is so important since it encapsulates within it the relationship between minorities and the state. Suhail feels both that his father cannot understand him, as the state does not understand the needs of its minorities, and furthermore he feels the weight of succeeding where his father has failed. "The question of the father isn't how to become free in relation to him (an Oedipal question) but how to find a path there where he didn't find any" (Deleuze and Guattari, 10). The theory of Minor Literature suggests reading a whole different paradigm of relations into the position of minorities, and the father-son relationship in *Sūkhā bargad* can be understood in these terms.

The relationship between father and son is best summed up in the following description by Rashida. In it she recognizes a danger lurking beneath the surface, though she too, like Suhail and their father, cannot formulate it:

> Father and Suhail! In one glance it was obvious that Father and Suhail are both ideologists. Exactly like Father, Suhail also couldn't stand narrow-minded Muslims or strict nationalist Hindus. Just like Father, Suhail hated politics and politicians. Still, I don't know why, it felt like there was also a huge difference between them. Was this only age and experience? No, it wasn't only this. Then what? (93)

I argue that the main cause of difference is the different political environments in which the father and son were acting. To link this to Jameson, while Suhail and his father share the same motivation, the subtexts that have influenced them create very different abilities in shaping the textures of their respective lives. In the era of the independence struggle, when the old social orders were in flux, and when the minoritization process of Muslims was still beginning, the father had more freedom of action. Suhail, on the other hand, grows up into an

environment with a clear agenda of interpellating Muslims as the "other", that is, of minoritizing them. While the father could rebel against his family traditions and follow national leaders like Nehru, Suhail has no contemporary role model and cannot rebel against his father's liberal views, as he is in agreement with them.

We can find parallels of Suhail and his father's relationship in Kafka's writing and in Walter Benjamin's observation that: "There is much to indicate that the world of officials and the world of the fathers is the same to Kafka" (110). Kafka was exceptionally in touch with his unconscious, and figures of power were always a source of anxiety and threat. In his *Letter to my Father* (1919), Kafka outlines his perspective on their troubled relationship. I take his description as a classic portrayal of the tensions between minorities and the state:

> Even years afterward I suffered from the tormenting fancy that the huge man, my father, the ultimate authority, would come almost for no reason at all and take me out of bed in the night and carry me out onto the pavlatche, and that consequently I meant absolutely nothing as far as he was concerned. (Kafka, *Brief an den Vater,* 20)

This can easily be read as a description of the state of minorities, specifically of Muslims in India, and in particular the sensation of helplessness in the face of absolute power. This feeling is repeatedly fed by periodic communal riots and the threat of arbitrary violence against Muslims in retaliation for some distant or invented event. In *Sūkhā bargad* the father does not offer support and cannot protect his children from the harsh realities they face. Deleuze and Guattari link the effect of the threat of violence to the way in which Minor Literature is permeated by this foreboding.[55]

[55] Deleuze and Guattari's definition of Minor Literature shows how the relationship between the father and son and the state and minority character can be linked: "The second characteristic of

4 The Contours of the External and Internal Geography

> Alongside the regular happenings of life, our surroundings started changing as if in a fairy tale. Words such as state (*riyāsat*), estate (*jāgir*), landlord (*zamīndar*), and *nawāb* lost their hold, and words such as state (*pradesh*), capital (*rajdhānī*) and new city acquired meaning. (*Sūkhā bargad,* 42)

One of the main ways in which Ahtesham links Suhail's and Rashida's personal struggles with the wider political and historical picture is by depicting their reactions to the way the city of Bhopal changes with time and makes them feel alienated. The massive physical changes Bhopal underwent as the result of Independence and Partition mirror the changes to centers of power that occurred in this period. There is a clear parallel between the development of Bhopal and the decline of Rashida and Suhail's nuclear family.[56] The shift between foundational social systems—feudal, secular-ideological and capitalistic—leaves the family floundering. The feudal system is especially prominent here, since Bhopal was an independent state ruled by a *nawāb*, and previously by the famous Begums of Bhopal, until it joined the newly created state of India in 1949. Both parents grew up in a city which had a clear Muslim majority and which was run in accordance with rules and customs that

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minor literatures is that everything in them is political. In major literatures, in contrast, the individual concern (familial, marital and so on) joins with other no less individual concerns, the social milieu serving as a mere environment or a background; this is so much the case that none of these Oedipal intrigues are specifically indispensable or absolutely necessary but all become as one in a large space. Minor literature is completely different; its cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately with politics. The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it" (17).

[56] For an important exploration of the link between the production of space and minority space and how urban space is a manifestation of power, see Jill Stoner's use of Deleuze and Guattari's term "Minor" in *Toward a Minor Architecture* (2012).

disappeared almost overnight.[57] Processes which had taken a few decades in other areas of north India happened very quickly once Bhopal was merged into the Indian nation state. One of the main threads in *Sūkhā bargad* is the way in which political, economic and social structures or ruling paradigms and ideologies evolve with each generation. These systems—the mixture of bureaucratic, social and ideological worldviews—profoundly change with each generation.

Rashida and Suhail's maternal grandfather worked as the head of the kitchen in the *nawāb's* palace, and their mother still takes pride in his position and tells stories about the splendor of feudal times. Suhail challenges his mother's pride by asking, "Did grandfather eat with the *nawāb* everyday as well?" (Ahtesham, 40). This question confuses and flusters the mother, bringing the change in values to the surface. The grandfather was a cook and there would obviously be no question of him dining with the *nawāb*, but whereas for Suhail's mother her father's role within the royal household made him an integral part of it, Suhail stresses the class distinction. The lawyer father represents the generation that struggled for independence and its enthusiasm in the era of nationalist ideology. His willingness to sacrifice his career and family by taking on *pro bono* cases and limiting himself to lawsuits that he supports ideologically combines the Gandhian ideal of self-abnegation, now extended to one's children, with the Abrahamic sacrifice, a point which I will examine later. The slow decline and death of the father parallel the end of the Nehruvian state and of the era of idealistic nationalism, along with the terminal decline of old Bhopal. Rashida and Suhail's growing up coincides with the era of the breakdown of ideology and the rise in corruption before the economic liberalization of the 1990s. Each generation is raised along the lines of the previous generation's system, but the lightning speed of changes brought about

[57] For more on Bhopal's history, see Lambert-Hurley.

by independence make the relationship between the generations especially fraught.

The swift changes take their toll in another form. As well as creating confusion for each generation, they also create a rupture in remembering the past. Towards the end of the novel, when Rashida is already working at the radio station and has separated from Vijay, she visits a part of town which she has not been to for a long time: "The map of the mountain had changed so much that it was hard to believe that at one time I knew it so thoroughly" (188). She then remembers that there used to be an old cannon on the top of the hill and that as a child she had asked her mother what it was for. "Mother didn't know, but in order to say something she said that at one time the cannon would announce *seherī* and *iftār* [the pre-dawn meal and the fast-breaking meal] for the Ramzan fast." A few lines later Rashida reveals that:

> As I grew older I discovered that there was no possible connection between *saharī* and *iftār* and this cannon [...]. Whatever Ammi had said was simply a figment of her imagination. But anyhow, in all the time that has passed I never reminded her of her lie. (189)

This conflation between different historical periods and the automatic linking of everything to the time when the city of Bhopal had a Muslim majority is immediately followed by Rashida seeing Vijay riding his scooter: "not only this, there was someone sitting behind him, a beautiful girl, wearing jeans and a T-shirt" (189). In the space of two paragraphs Rashida is shocked by how the changes in the city make it almost unrecognizable. She remembers a childhood story evoking a glorious Muslim history which she knows is false, and she sees her ex-lover riding with a modern girl "wearing jeans and a T-shirt," a clear marker of the break with old traditions. Ahtesham brings the different layers of history together in order to show how the changes have wreaked havoc in the lives of Rashida and Suhail. Moreover, using the mother's story about the

cannon, he shows how these changes have the potential to create alternative narratives and memories which are not necessarily based in facts.

Every change in the physical surroundings of Bhopal that the novel traces is accompanied by an emotional response from Rashida which expresses her growing tension and feeling of estrangement:

> As it was, we didn't manage to keep up with the changes of the growing city, nor could we travel big distances that kept stretching with the expansion of the city. The new city and its new map didn't have space for our house. (95)

There is a palpable sense that the city is leaving their family behind in a sort of internal exile. The very presence of their house is being erased from the map, and along with it their own lives are being cast aside.[58] Their response is increasingly to stay at home, since the public space has become a space of alienation:

> All of a sudden the walls of our house contracted. The newly cleaned and ordered city left us behind. The door and walls of the house had been in need of a whitewash for a long time. Outside the unrelenting traffic increased. Suhail rarely left the house. (170)

The idea of shelter is embodied in trees and familiar spaces. Indeed, the dried banyan tree (*Sūkhā bargad)* of the title of the book symbolizes the death of such a symbol. The image of the tree is used to press the point home that there is nowhere to hide in the new city. Every shade- and shelter-giving tree is cut down in the relentless march forward which creates increasing tensions for

[58] Jameson shows how this description of alienation symbolizes Rashida and Suhail's failure to create an individual trajectory for themselves:

> Disalienation in the traditional city, then, involves the practical reconquest of a sense of place and the construction or reconstruction of an articulated ensemble which can be retained in memory and which the individual subject can map and remap along the moments of mobile, alternative trajectories. (1992, 51)

Muslim identity: "[During our college years] the road in front of our house was being widened with lots of noise and activity, and as a result of it many big, shade-giving trees had to be cut down" (127).

Thus, in *Sūkhā bargad* representations of space are linked to both the physical layout of the city and the effects they have on the protagonists' psyches. The speed of Bhopal's development is linked to the speed of the siblings' deterioration, showing how the "new map" squeezes out the space for an identity that does not fit into the prescribed divisions. This new layout of the city can be thought of as a new system of interpellation which the siblings resist, thus becoming confined to increasingly narrow quarters.

5 Rejecting the Interpellation

Althusser defines interpellation as the way in which the state, or ideology, imposes an identity on individuals and groups from above:

> [I]deology "acts" or "functions" in such a way that it "recruits" subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or "transforms" the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: "Hey, you there!" (1984, 48)

Having grown up in an idealist house, albeit with two belief systems—religious piety and secular idealism, represented respectively by the mother and the father—Suhail and Rashida are ill-equipped for the compromises that are demanded of them. Ahtesham's protagonists refuse to become fully developed since they resist being interpellated by either the Hindu or Muslim societies into a position they reject.

For example, when Rashida goes to visit Vijay's house long after they have broken up, his parents greet her with great warmth, but insist that she

sings or recites some Urdu poetry. "The ground slipped beneath her feet […] he was talking with such conviction as if singing was my profession!" (186). Vijay's father automatically associates Rashida with Urdu poetry since she is a Muslim and works at the radio station. Rashida rejects being interpellated in such a way and abruptly leaves the house, severing her connection with Vijay's family. The price for refusing to act in prescribed or expected ways is therefore social isolation. The position imposed on Rashida and Suhail angers them to such an extent that they cannot articulate their resistance to it. In other words, this interpellation leaves them in a position in which they are unable to fight back. The nature of their situation in society is riddled with contradictions, which makes resistance to it all the more difficult.

This refusal to be interpellated lies at the heart of the novel, yet it is never given a name or explicitly identified by the protagonists. They acknowledge that as Muslims they are "othered," but the discourse of secularism and instances when they are treated as equals confuse them just as much as experiences of discrimination. The fact that they are "hailed" as Muslims again and again brings their Muslim identity to the fore, while their identity, like any identity, is constituted of many different and at times clashing forces. Their ability to develop a public self, based on their inner volition, is severely limited, as they are repeatedly pigeon-holed as Muslims even by those who are close to them. Worse still, when they experience a setback in life, they never know if it is has to do with discrimination connected to their Muslim identity or simply the vicissitudes of life. This lack of stable ground is what makes their struggle so difficult, and it is also why those around them cannot understand their hardship. Suhail's rejection of how other Muslims respond to the interpellation of either secular ideology or the minoritization of the Indian nation state is best exemplified by his conflictual and swerving relationship with his own father and the local Muslim politician Rajab Ali.

As a young man the father was goaded into eating pork in order to prove that he was truly secular. Suhail is horrified when he discovers this and loses face among his friends in front of whom he had vehemently defended him. The father's eating of pork shows the pressure to show that as a Muslim you are secular by rejecting your religion, to hyper-perform secularism as it were. Suhail reacts to the "unfairness" of the demand to hyper-perform as much as to the horror of his father really tasting pork. Suhail's reaction is compounded by the realization of these two disappointments: first, that Muslims are pushed to prove their secularism in ways that don't apply to Hindus; and secondly, that his father cooperated with this form of interpellation rather than standing up and fighting against it.

When Suhail starts failing his college courses, his father does nothing apart from encouraging him to continue his studies. He never confronts Suhail, and there is no moment of a cathartic argument or fight. We can read Suhail's increasingly erratic behaviour in drinking and toying with religion as a cry for help and attention from his father. Yet his father offers none, and it is instead Vijay who assumes the role of providing firm guidance and confronts his bad behaviour (119). However, this move by Vijay only increases the tension between them and serves to isolate Suhail further. In his desperation he tries to find an alternative father figure in Rajab Ali, the politician he used to loathe. Yet, Rajab Ali, in a way foreshadowed in his introduction, also proves inadequate as a father figure, and Suhail is left with no one to look up to.

As a confident young man Suhail detests Rajab Ali. Suhail identifies Rajab Ali as representing the problem rather than the solution. That is, Rajab Ali accepts his role as a Muslim in the way Muslims are defined by external forces. Instead of resisting being interpellated, Rajab Ali cooperates by fulfilling the role of the Muslim who "defends" Islam and Indian Muslims. The way in which his religious and communal affiliation becomes his defining marker riles Suhail. His father interrogates him, and during a long exchange in which his

father presses Suhail to identify exactly why Rajab Ali is problematic, Suhail doesn't manage to put his finger on it, finally saying: "These kinds of people give the Muslims of the country a bad name!" (135).

Yet during Suhail's period of experimenting with religion he becomes a Rajab Ali supporter until he becomes disillusioned with him. However, during the time in which Suhail supports Rajab Ali he explains his support in the following words: "He [Rajab Ali] says the bitter truth that if you are a Muslim you should show the world your superiority—why take this emotion and feel yourself to be guilty [*mujrim*] or lesser than others?" (140). Rajab Ali manages to evoke the sense of pain which is part of minoritization, but by doing so he also makes it real and paints a picture of "us versus them" rather than one which depicts the many complexities of communal relations. His promise to eliminate the feelings of guilt at being different is too powerful for Suhail to ignore. Before Suhail loses faith in his father's secular ideology, he recognizes that Rajab Ali's claim to represent Muslims as a monolithic community is dangerous since it is itself part of the process of being interpellated as the "other" or, to use Mufti's formulation, of minoritization. However, Suhail's desire for release from the position of guilt arising from his different identity leads him to try a path he knows will end in disillusionment.

This is where Ahtesham's characters most resemble the protagonist K in *The Trial* (1925) by Kafka. K has to fight a trial which can be understood to be of his own making. There is nothing forcing him to participate, yet some internal mechanism impels him to cooperate with his persecutors. I argue that this mechanism has to do with his minor position. He is automatically guilty as a member of a minority, and there is a palpable sense of relief at the trial for finally bringing his ambiguous position to an end: "The court does not want anything from you. It receives you when you come and dismisses you when you go" (Kafka 2009, 160). The whole trial is based on K's cooperation and would not happen otherwise. In this sense we can call it self-persecution out of

the inability to live with the ambiguity of minorityhood. This reading also fits with Kafka's parable "Before the Law", a short text in which the protagonist's sole desire is to be judged. Both Suhail (113,114) and many of Kafka's protagonists sit with their "heads hanging" as a sign of their resignation and defeat (Deleuze and Guattari, 5).

In *Sūkhā bargad* none of the Muslim protagonists are discriminated against to the extent that they can identify and formulate the "othering" or link it to some tangible problem. They might suffer from discrimination and tension, but they are also accepted as part of society. For example, Rashida gets a job at the radio station, and Suhail gets the highest marks during his first two years at college. I argue that what holds Suhail and Rashida back is their own self-negation, which is a form of resistance to being interpellated. While they experience tension as members of the Muslim minority, at the same time they also participate as equals in society and maintain genuine sustained relationships with Hindus. When Suhail experiences difficulties during his studies, he blames unspecified, unproved anti-Muslim sentiments in his college. During Rashida's breakdown at the end of the novel she expresses a hatred for doctors: "How I hate these doctors and their airs! I never believed that a doctor ever understood a patient or ever cured the source of a disease […]. Whatever their instruments cannot measure does not exist for them" (222). I read this as an expression of the frustration of describing the feeling of minoritization, a feeling of insidious doubt regarding the self and society famously explored by Kafka.

It seems that the ambivalence of their position makes it harder for Suhail and Rashida, as for Zamir Ahmad Khan in *Dāstān e lāpatā,* to resist being interpellated into a marginalized position. In a twisted way, echoing a major thread in Kafka's work, the lack of uniform "othering," of a clear position that marks them as inferior or problematic, leads Suhail and Rashida to become their own prosecutors. They themselves block their own way since they cannot

stand existing in an ambiguous position. For example, Rashida has the marks to study medicine, and science is her strongest subject, but instead, going against her father's wishes, she chooses journalism, which will not make use of her abilities in the same way (80). She holds herself back, while her surroundings encourage her to excel and bloom. Suhail becomes his own prosecutor after failing college; he never gives expression to his abilities and looks instead for solace in religion or alcohol. The only clear position they can hold on to is one of failure, since being successful, while a real possibility for both of them, means becoming interpellated and vulnerable to constant tension between their desires and the roles they are given in society. Thus, the trajectory of their lives is one of potential ending in failure caused by themselves as well as external forces. The confusing social relationships entailed by minorityhood create psychologically troubled protagonists since their struggle is not clearly demarcated.[59]

6 Friendship and the Public Sphere

Sūkhā bargad, especially during Suhail and Rashida's formative years, is full of discussions and arguments. These discussions take place mainly between Suhail and his friend Vijay, but also between Suhail and his older Pakistani-American relative Parveez. With Parveez these discussions either occur in private or in family settings where all can hear the debates and argue about current politics in India and Pakistan. Unlike the discussions with Vijay, those with Parveez are never acrimonious and do not lead to a mutual falling out. Many of their exchanges circle around where to live and the atmosphere in Pakistan, India and the United States, where Parveez has lived for a few years with his wife and their child. At the end of the novel, after debating whether to

[59] As mentioned in the introduction, these struggles are different from those of Dalits, for example, who have to face a more visible and obvious racial discrimination.

live in India or the United States, Parveez and his wife move back to the United States, since they cannot see a future for themselves in India. The fact that they choose migration serves as a warning of the viability of living in Bhopal. This migration also links up with the migration of many other characters in the novels discussed in this thesis and the theme of the lure of the West raised particularly in Nasira Sharma's novel *Parijāt* (Chapter Four). I will return to this in the conclusion.

Vijay and Suhail develop an especially close relationship while attending the same English-medium school and college.[60] They are welcome in each other's houses, and Vijay is especially loved by Suhail's parents. Vijay and Suhail also share a common attitude and ideology towards Bhopal and India, and this serves to keep them close: "Now Suhail and Vijay could talk about anything, Suhail criticizing Hindus and Vijay Muslims, yet no one could doubt their good intentions" (88). However, a series of events, each too small to matter individually, accumulate to gradually create a distance between the two friends, so that Suhail comes to feel that Vijay cannot understand his position. These episodes all have to do with different interpretations and attitudes to the political developments happening around them. In spite of Vijay being portrayed in the most positive light in his dealings with both Suhail and Rashida, he still remains blind to the tensions gnawing at them. Eventually, after Suhail turns into an embittered and struggling man, their friendship does not survive.

The reason that the friendship between Suhail and Vijay fails is because they cannot fully understand each other's perspective. This is especially true for Vijay, who is not sensitive enough to the ways in which external discourse has the potential to undermine Suhail's confidence. During the years when they

[60] For an exploration of the meanings of friendship in the South Asian context, see Daud and Flatt. Also, see Ahtesham's reference in *Dāstān e lāpatā* to *A Passage to India* and the friendship between Aziz and Fielding which Zamir sees as central to the message of the novel (106-7).

share a common ideology of communal coexistence they both think they are going to change the world, and Suhail makes impassioned speeches on every occasion:

> We and the following generations will live and die here, this is the only truth. When we die we will become one with this soil, so why separate ourselves from the life that takes place here? The country needs a joint culture (*milī julī tahzīb*), a joint language which all can call their own. For this everybody will have to sacrifice something (*sabko thoṛī thoṛī kurbānī denī hogī*). (88)[61]

However, the strong bond created by this shared ideology does not manage to survive the pressures exerted by the outside world. But unlike Vijay, alongside the loss of this optimistic ideology Suhail also loses his self-confidence. They experience current events differently, and the tensions this causes ruin the relationship:

> [Suhail says:] "This is India, and I'm a second class citizen! Whatever I think, whatever I do, the fact that I'm a Muslim means I'll never be equal to a Hindu! This isn't my place; only those who belong to the country have a chance!" [Vijay:] "I don't know where you've arrived at." There was surprise in Vijay's voice: "Believe me, I still don't understand." (121)

The argument between Suhail and Vijay continues, and when Suhail complains about being rejected by his girlfriend Gita, Vijay accuses him:

> "You're trying to put the Muslim label on this in order to capitalize on it!" "Who's talking about Hindu-Muslim relations?" Suhail's voice was as taken aback as Vijay's—"Until today I've been crying Hindustani-Hindustani till I was hoarse." (122)

[61] The impassioned speech about the need for unity is exactly the agenda of Nasira Sharma's novel *Pārijāt* discussed in Chapter Four.

The exchange between Suhail and Vijay spins out of control, and they hurl accusations at each other taken from public discourse. In other words, the argument between them deteriorates since it stops being about Suhail and Vijay and becomes about being a Muslim and a Hindu. Suhail is angry with Vijay for not being sensitive enough to the reality of Muslims in India, while Vijay cannot understand why Suhail is so bellicose regarding criticism of Muslims by Hindus. The irony is that, when Suhail spends time with his relatives before his decline, he constantly gets into fights with them about Hindu–Muslim relations so that he is attacked from all sides. In arguments with his relatives, he says things like, "Our parents weren't stupid for deciding to stay here in '47" (88). Yet discussing a recent arrest of a Muslim businessman which family members claim is discriminatory, Suhail says "How is this a Hindu–Muslim thing?" (90). His relatives tell him to "watch his mouth" and accuse him of being a supporter of Hindus (91). Suhail is attacked on one side by Vijay, who supports him but does not fully understand him, and on the other side by Muslim relatives who complain about constant discrimination in their daily life.

Suhail starts out with a firm belief in state nationalism but slowly accumulates experiences which make him doubt his ideology, and he starts interpreting his own failures in light of his Muslim identity rather than his own personal responsibility. The process he goes through is striking in its extremes. At the height of his ideological optimism in college he is described thus:

> Whenever Suhail spoke, and the opportunity arose often in front of family or people he met, his voice was full of confidence. (88)

> I was also born right here and grew up here. Why should I feel that Hindus are my enemies? Why have school and college friends, or other acquaintances never acted towards me in this way? From kitchen to temple settings why has no one ever made me feel like a stranger? (91)

However, once he starts declining and his friendship with Vijay unravels he no longer has the ability to express himself coherently, and the only occasions on which he talks are when he is drunk:

> For you life is easy, Parveez bhai […]. You have confidence and faith (*āsthā aur yakīn*), not me! What do you know about pain and suffering? We live and die and even kill in this country! [...] But what right do I have using "we"? How many people would give me the right to represent them? This too I know only too well! (218)

In his drunken state Suhail expresses a sentiment that can help us understand the *lāpatā* Bhopali or shadow figure of *Dāstān e lāpatā*:

> But tell me this, what should I do? If I'm sick, then suggest some cure. If I'm incurable, then help me to somehow finish myself! What is the sum total of an innocent, naïve boy's problems? What is reality for him? Either the problems finish the boy, or he lives and forgets all about them. Try and imagine a man who, no matter how much he develops, there always remains a small sensitive and innocent child living inside him. On the journey from birth to death, this child passes and bears all the troubles without the convenience of forgetting. (*Sūkhā bargad,* 218)

Here Suhail, just like Zamir in *Dāstān e lāpatā*, is expressing his difficulties and wishes that he could be cured or at least become less sensitive. In another link between the novels, showing that they are dealing with the question of minority from slightly different angles, Zamir calls *A passage to India* the most important book he has ever read (Ahtesham, *Dāstān e lāpatā,* 106). In *A passage to India* the friendship between Fielding and Aziz is central to exposing the many ways in which colonialism shapes and constrains the relationship between these two men. Even though they have a natural rapport, the realities of colonialism and the need of each of them to maintain contact with their own community create a rift in their friendship. In *Sūkhā bargad*, Suhail and Vijay's relationship serves a

similar function in that it shows how external discourse manages to infiltrate a non-threatening intimacy of friendship and ultimately ruin it.

Suhail and Vijay's friendship develops and unravels against the backdrop of events and processes taking place in the public sphere.[62] The novel is very careful in tracing how political events change the boundaries of discourse and influence the friendship in a negative way. Slaughter argues that:

> Assaults on the public sphere have consequences for the individual and the possibility of constructing narratives of identification; reciprocally, assaults on the individual have consequences for the public sphere and its social texture. (160)

For the siblings in *Sūkhā bargad* the riots and wars are the markers of deterioration of their status in the public sphere. This causes them to lose the ability to construct "narratives of identification" that will allow them to function fully in society. During the first riots Rashida experiences in Bhopal, she relates that "during partition there was no Hindu–Muslim violence here" (43). The terror Rashida experiences triggers the memory of confusion in school when a teacher talks about Shivaji as a hero, while at home Aurangzeb is lauded by her uncles and Shivaji is called a "mountain rat":

> In order to understand what patriotism is (*deśprem*), what kind of sacrifice is needed (*balidān*), we must learn about Shivaji's life […]. Shivaji the hero? Aurangzeb the conqueror (*ālamgīr*)? The noise of the soldier's boots resounded off the pavement. (44)

Rashida links the tension between the different narratives she learns at home and at school with the riots outside, and in the first place the violence is what

[62] I follow Slaughter's definition: "The public sphere is not just a space that processes, regulates, and circulates stories and their generic narrative forms; it mediates between the realms of political governance and private life, fixing the terms separation and interaction between the state's administrative institutions and the social world of the people." (148)

makes her think about the two competing versions. Rather than identifying or siding with one or other of the two stories, she feels abandoned and confused.

The periodic nature of riots creates a new position for Muslims in Bhopal. The last paragraph of the novel describes Vijay approaching Rashida just after she makes up her mind to go back to work and decides to contact Vijay, since he "never was and never will be my enemy" (228). The reader is led to believe that Rashida has managed to reach some internal balance that will allow her to live her life. And then Suhail says:

> "Have you read the paper?" Suhail said looking at me in a worried way. "Jamshedpur has become Karbala. So many Muslims have been killed that they've been wiped out. That writer who spent his life writing about the theme of Hindu–Muslim fraternity in Urdu, he was also taken care of! A small photo of his is in the newspaper." (228)

Just as Rashida is ready to face the world again, she is served with a reminder that perhaps it is not up to her and that her internal struggles were not figments of her imagination but real threats. Slaughter has argued that in dissensual *Bildungsromane*, "governmental assaults on the public sphere and the perversion of its role in manufacturing national common sense register in a generic struggle with the normative form of the *Bildungsroman*" (198). The "generic struggle" in *Sūkhā bargad* takes the form of characters who do not achieve *Bildung*. That is, Rashida and Suhail never attain a balance between their inner selves and the demands put on them by Hindus and Muslims alike. In other words, Rashida is denied a full recovery or full *Bildung* by being reminded that there is no space for her identity in the current public sphere. The riots are the "perversion of […] national common sense" to which she cannot have an answer as an individual facing forces larger than herself. *Sūkhā bargad* places both its protagonists in critical junctures of minority existence in order to expose, in multiple ways, the difficulties of minority existence and

specifically of secular Muslims in Bhopal who develop alongside the new nation state.

Rashida too is acculturated into this world of options that is narrower than that of her father's, but her gender plays an equal if not more dominant role in her development and in respect of the expectations laid upon women.

7 The Minor within the Minor

Rashida occupies a double position in the novel. She is both a protagonist and the narrator of Suhail's travails. Her role as Suhail's sister and her attempts to describe his behaviour leave her own story on the margins. This is a crucial point, since Rashida arguably represents the minor within the minor. Being a woman and a Muslim, she has to deal with the pressures on her identity in a world that is both patriarchal and majoritarian. Rashida has to deal with two competing sets of expectations. First, the pressure to get married, the role ascribed to her by her traditional family, is the culmination of her personal development. Secondly, her father and Vijay both expect her to forge a path as an independent woman living and making decisions according to her own choices and ideas. In the novel, Rashida fails on both fronts. She does not marry, and she never manages to live her life independently of the position ascribed to her as a woman and a Muslim. Rashida's situation is best understood through Jameson's argument that social contradictions that have to do with ideology often take "the form of the *aporia* or the *antinomy*" (82, emphasis in original). That is, the narration of Rashida's impasse represents the existence of two incompatible sets of demands.

Rashida has to contend with her mother's wish to see her get married at the same time as dealing with her father's pressure to pursue a career that will make a positive impact on society. "Perhaps seeing that mother was worried, one day Vijay asked her what she was thinking of, and she laid out her troubles

in front of him. The biggest issue, it was clear, was my [Rashida's] marriage" (87). For her traditional mother there is no reason for her daughter to study for a Master's degree since success is measured by marriage. Her father, on the other hand, while discussing Rashida's future, talks about the nation and ideology rather than her personal desire: "Think about what a great service you can do for your country" (96). Neither parent is interested in Rashida's individual choices, seeing her instead through the lens of their own world view. When pressed by Vijay to satisfy her mother by getting married, Rashida gets angry and says: "Is my not getting married a national issue?" (98). Rashida recognizes that any decision she takes will lead to a break with either her family or with Vijay. This inability to set the course of her own life without sacrificing a part of it leads Rashida to lose on all fronts, and all these pressures lead her to a breakdown. Unable to decide whether to accept a marriage proposal from Pakistan, Rashida spends her days in bed suspended in a semi-delirious state:

> The days kept passing, but my health didn't show any signs of improvement. During the past few days, in the field between the house and the library, I kept looking at the gathering show. A whole world was settled in front of my eyes. 'The Great Venice Circus,' it said on the banners. (220)

This circus triggers a memory of a circus performance she had witnessed as a child. The highlight of the performance consisted of a girl and a man perfoming an act in which the man tied the girl, his daughter, to a board and then threw knives all around her till she was surrounded by quivering blades:

> A girl, bound hand and feet, was brought on to the stage [...] one by one the knives were embedded around her while she didn't even flinch. There was a hush in the auditorium [...] everyone was staring at her thinking of the danger her life was in. (225)

Rashida's delirium causes her to conflate her memory with the circus currently performing outside her window, and she becomes agitated. Perhaps now, as an adult, she can identify her younger self with the girl in the performance. This brings us full circle to the beginning of the novel, which sets up the Abrahamic sacrifice of Ishmael as a foundational story in Rashida and Suhail's development. How does Rashida interpret her own memory? Is she disappointed in herself since she flinched when faced with what felt like life-threatening decisions? Is she angry at the father figure who is willing to put his children in danger to prove his own point? Rashida recognizes the implications of the story, yet is unable to disentangle her reactions and reach a position from which she might move beyond the impasse:

> What was father thinking, and why did he choose this prosaic meaningless future for himself? What was in his mind when he separated his home from everybody else? These thoughts troubled me, but when I looked at father or felt his hand on my head I felt these were false emotions. The world that father chose for us wasn't limited by this city or this family. In our world there were no restrictions, only open space through which we could advance far ahead. Because father spoke very little, there were very few instances to hear this from him in his own words. (52)

Rashida both laments and respects her father's choices. The question remains open whether the father set his children up to fail by believing in a reality which did not exist, or whether his unbending idealism is worthy of respect.

Ironically, at the end of the novel we learn that Suhail has started working for the father's older brother's sons in their successful business—"Their business was doing well, and their children, with no shame or revolutionary announcement, were studying in expensive English-medium schools, wearing fashionable clothes and living in a modern style" (226). When Rashida and Suhail were sent to an English-medium school the family condemned them and the children were put in a difficult position. One

generation later the problem has disappeared, but this is too late for them. As a child Rashida was terrified of meeting a family member on the way to school and not knowing whether to *salaam* him or her or whether to say hello in the English style:

> Every day on the way to school I used to sit staring out of the bus window at the big gate in case I would see Banne Dada so that I could wave my arms at him and say "hello". "Hello", but I always salaam Banne Dada? If I say hello, then who knows how he will feel. And if I salaam him, who knows what everyone on the bus will think? Will they start laughing at me? (37-38)

The fact that Rashida and Suhail paved the way by going to an English-medium school gives them no advantage or credit within the family. Rather, they are still seen as having "broken ranks" and as having a questionable ideology. Reading this relationship through the lens of minority, we can argue that the pressures exerted on the minority community by the state provoke the minority community's sensitivity towards those who are seen as cooperating with systems which are foreign to the community's traditions. In Rashida and Suhail's case they are censored for going to a co-ed English-medium school and for striving beyond their ascribed position. The self-censorship of the community is thus another feature of the intricacies of the "minor" *Bildung*. "Minor" individuals are limited by both the state and their own community; both are eager to limit the individual's *Bildung* to one that conforms to their expectations and larger needs and are threatened by those who challenge the boundaries. Their father sends his children to a new schooling system while he himself was educated in the old one, and in this sense he never broke ranks with his surroundings. The established state system prepares students for the world as it exists, whereas Rashida and Suhail are tasked with creating and testing new modes of communal existence. Perhaps unsurprisingly, even the

father ends up supporting traditional structures when his children cross invisible boundaries:

> If he understood the situation [Rashida's affair with Vijay], then why did he [father] not announce his support until his last breath? In spite of all his love, he didn't help even one tiny bit with solving my biggest problem. The thing which was so difficult for me would have been so much easier had he just uttered a few words. Even if there had been a million objections to his stance, I would have received so much strength from his support. (154)

Rashida's relationship with Vijay tests her father's ideals and actions, and for the first time in the novel his actions are not in tune with his professed ideology. In *The Political Unconscious* Jameson shows how Joseph Conrad in *Lord Jim* "uses much the same anecdotal form of social scandal to deconceal social institutions otherwise imperceptible to the naked eye" (265). The scandal in question here is Rashida's relationship with Vijay, which tests the limits of Muslims' secular identity.

While the father's secular ideology is only partially a "social institution," he represents the idea of coexistence between Muslims and Hindus along secular lines, but is unable to take his ideology to its final conclusion when it comes to his own daughter. Ahtesham "deconceals" the limits of the father's ideology and the secularism that he represents.

Vijay rejects the problems arising from an inter-communal marriage, whereas Rashida insists that the problems are insurmountable, leaving them both at an impasse. Her "biggest problem" exposes the limits and in fact the impossibility of being truly secular while maintaining one's own tradition as a religious minority. Rashida faces the choice of marrying Vijay and losing part of her identity or of remaining at home and maintaining her identity at the cost of giving up the relationship and shutting herself off from the world.

Once the border between her personal life and her identity as a Muslim woman becomes blurred, Rashida loses the ability to lead her life according to her own wishes and ends up alienated from both her own community and the wider society. After one of the pivotal scenes in the novel in which Rashida and Vijay sleep together, Rashida's stream of thought delves into her subconscious. She is afraid of being abandoned by her parents for betraying their trust and also thinks about the Bengali refugees who escaped to India when the Pakistanis attacked during the 1971 war of independence. The feeling of insecurity sown by partition and by repeated riots is an open wound: "A reel of unending thoughts went through her head... When a Muslim changes their religion to marry a Hindu, not only the ignorant uneducated Muslims feel bad, also the educated ones do" (108).

Rashida's relationship with a young Hindu man stretches the limit of her father's secular-progressive ideology and exposes its deepest "texture", to use Jameson's term (255). The question that begs to be asked is: had Suhail wanted to marry a Hindu girl, would the father's response have been the same, or would it have been different? In other words, is the father's ideology and version of modernity still a gendered one in which he prefers to see his son rather than his daughter at the vanguard? Or does the fact that it is his daughter awaken feelings of religious affiliation, since he prefers her not being assimilated into a Hindu identity? Or, does Rashida's affair make the father realize the limits and shortcomings of the secularism he has believed in all his life?

Rashida herself feels a responsibility towards her Muslim identity, which she finds hard to explain in the secular terms that she otherwise lives by. Planning a joint future together, Vijay tries to make light of the religious difference, but Rashida resists this:

> "What is the difference between you and a Hindu girl your age these days? You were raised in the same way that a Hindu girl is educated. Can anyone tell if you're Muslim or Hindu by looking at you?" I froze. "There is a difference," I said, and then continued—"and a very big one as well!" Vijay silently looked at me in a questioning way. "When I suddenly get hurt, then a 'Ya Allah' automatically comes out of my mouth. This is the difference, that's it." (128)

Rashida is not willing to be incorporated into Indian society, since this means losing part of her identity, but she does not have the wherewithal to express this clearly while talking to Vijay. Her impossible position "deconceals" the fact that there is no such thing as a secular society. There is a Hindu secular society in India like there is a Christian secular society in Europe or a Muslim secular society in some Muslim majority states. The minorities in those societies can never fully take part in the secular discourse as this is predicated on the majority religious identity. The next section examines how the possibilities and limitations of cross communal friendship lead to the discovery of the limits of secular identity.

8 Conclusion

In the novel *Sūkhā bargad*, Ahtesham employs a variety of narrative strategies in order to highlight the disjuncture between the promise of *Bildung* and the reality that Muslim characters undergo. The theme of the Koranic sacrifice, in which the father is willing to offer his child to a higher cause, be it God or ideology, is central to the novel. The word that keeps being repeated in different contexts is *kurbānī,* which echoes the Abrahamic gesture (20, 88, 149). The novel also raises the question of whether the secular Indian state sanctifies its minorities and demands from them that they be the sacrificial lamb. By framing the story in this way, Ahtesham is creating a space in Hindi for Muslims as rounded Indian characters along with their core religious narratives.

He shows how nationalist self-sacrifice can acquire resonances with the story of Abraham and Ishmael. In other words, *Sūkhā bargad* not only deals with the tensions of being Muslim in independent India, it does so on its own terms by inserting Islamic story paradigms into Hindi. This insertion of Islamic tropes is similar to Nasira Sharma's agenda in *Pārijāt*. This will be discussed in detail in Chapter Four and the conclusion.

Sūkhā bargad lucidly outlines the tensions inherent in the position of Muslims in secular India. They can either maintain their religious identity or sever ties with their relatives and foster ties with sympathetic Hindus. However, the Hindus will struggle to understand the Muslim point of view, since many of the tensions of the minority are intangible and are the result of a heightened sensitivity rather than a response to clear cases of discrimination. Vijay is portrayed in the most positive light, yet he too fails to grasp Rashida and Suhail's predicament. By depicting relations with both Muslims and Hindus, Ahtesham shows that a secular Muslim identity is a threat to both the Muslim community and to a secular discourse which is exposed as being rooted in Hinduism. There is no middle ground for Muslims, as they are interpellated into certain limited roles. By repeatedly referring to ideas of sacrifice, justice, law and guilt, Ahtesham poses the question of the position of Muslims in India and specifically in Bhopal both at the level of the nation state and on a deeply personal level. In a similar way to Kafka, Ahtesham shows how the marginalization or interpellation of Muslims creates personal crises which cannot be overcome and how the position of being in minority is connected to experiencing guilt.

Yet guilt and the tensions arising from being Muslim are not evenly applied across the field of Muslim writers in Hindi. The next chapter deals with the writings of Asghar Wajahat, an example of how some authors represent a world in which the protagonists' Muslim identity has very little to do with their *Bildung*.

Chapter Three: Asghar Wajahat's Novels and Short Stories: Form and Content

> "Dada, what is the relationship between creation and ideology?" [Rithwik] Ghatak gulped down the remaining alcohol in his glass and said "The same relationship as between salt and dal. [...] If there is too much salt the dal is inedible. If there is too little salt it is also impossible to eat." (7)
>
> Asghar Wajahat (*Demokresiyā*, 7)

1 Introduction

This chapter examines three novels and a number of short stories written by Asghar Wajahat (1946-). A close reading of Wajahat's fiction reveals a striking divergence between his novels and short stories. While Wajahat's novels focus on Muslim characters, they do not exhibit any special interest in minority identity issues, the state of Muslims in India, or even the major upheavals that have shaped communal relations in North India such as partition, the demolition of the Babri Masjid and numerous riots. Thus after dealing with Manzoor Ahtesham's novels, Wajahat's present a conundrum. This divergence in subject matter and even in writing style, as will be discussed below, raises questions about the relationship between form and content. Wajahat's novels describe a world in which Muslim identity alone does not carry a special meaning but only creates vulnerable characters, especially when it intersects with other marginalizing factors such as poverty. The protagonists of his novels undergo very little development or change in reaction to their surroundings, and the narrative progresses in a linear fashion, with hardly any drama.

This is not the case with Wajahat's short stories, however, in which he deals with the violence of partition and the lasting psychological impact of riots and communal tension. This "division of labor" between novels and short

stories raises important questions regarding genre and form, and its influence on the themes of the fiction. Following Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), I suggest that "[i]n reading a text, one must open it out both to what went into it and to what its author excluded" (79). The question of whether Wajahat "excludes" the tensions of minority existence from his novels, or whether they do not exist in the worlds that he creates, remains open throughout this chapter.

The main themes explored in this chapter are therefore (a) the relationship between form and content, and specifically the difference between Wajahat's non-political novels and his political short stories. Regarding this issue, a specific question is (b) how to approach the absence of tension and angst exhibited in the writings of other minority authors. Moreover, (c) this chapter also shows that minorityhood alone is not enough to create tension for Wajahat's characters. In order to influence the character or the trajectory of the story, minorityhood needs to intersect with other marginalizing factors such as poverty. Following this point, this chapter asks (d) how a Shia identity differs from a Sunni identity, and how erstwhile Shia hegemony in the region can go some way to countering trajectories of marginalization. Finally, the chapter also (e) deals with the theme of madness and how it is deployed in Wajahat's stories as a criticism of society.

The chapter is divided into two main parts. The first section focuses on three of Wajahat's novels: *Sāt āsmān* (*Seven Skies*, 1996) *Kaisī āgī lagāī* (*How did the Fire Start?*, 2004) and *Barkhā racāī* (*Creating the Monsoon*, 2009). The second section focuses on his short stories, especially the collections *Maiṁ hindū hūṁ* (*I am a Hindu*, 2006) and *Demokresiyā* (*Democracy*, 2013). In examining the novels, I will question the applicability of Deleuze and Guattari's theory of Minor Literature and of Jameson's "political unconscious" to narratives that seem to eschew interpretation. I will then juxtapose Wajahat's novels with his short stories, which deal with politics and ambiguity, and examine them primarily

through the prism of the theme of madness. I will argue that the genre of the short story is particularly suited to the representation of intensified periods such as riots and their aftermath.

As already mentioned in the Introduction, Asghar Wajahat was born into a Shia family in 1946 and grew up in Fatehpur, Uttar Pradesh. His ancestors were landowners, and like many Shias he traces his roots through Persia all the way to the Prophet.[63] He attended Aligarh Muslim University, where he graduated with a PhD in Hindi literature. Since 1971 he has worked in the Hindi Department of Jamia Milllia Islamia University in New Delhi. He has published a number of novels, numerous short stories and a few plays.

2 The Problem of Politics

The first thing I need to do is to question my approach and ask whether thinking about Wajahat's fiction as Minor Literature is at all helpful. Deleuze and Guattari do not argue that all minorities writing in the majority's language create Minor Literature. Rather, they identify Minor Literature through the texts themselves rather than the author's identity and affiliation. So if we go back to Deleuze and Guattari's definition of the three characteristics of minor literature—"the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation" (18)—are any of these three characteristics present in Wajahat's texts?

I would argue that there is no deterritorialization of language in his novels, short stories or plays. The Hindi Wajahat uses does not call attention to itself or play with the history of Hindi by, for example, looking for gaps between the language as it is imagined and the way it is practiced. Some of

[63] Wajahat's biography on his website: Asghar Wajahat (accessed 20/6/2018).

Wajahat's Muslim characters are authors and journalists who write in Hindi, and this is never a source of tension for them. Wajahat's prose uses the full range available in Hindi, which means that there are high-register words from both Sanskrit and Arabo-Persian. His language is less Urdu-influenced than Manzoor Ahtesham's and, unlike Ahtesham's, his characters do not use high-register Sanskrit words with irony to stress a point or play with the readers' expectations. Moreover, his novels are dotted with references to Hindi literature, such as the stories in *Dharamyug* magazine and the work of the poet Rajkamal Chaudhary, and this too places his work unproblematically within the fold of Hindi. He pointedly chooses to ignore the implications of a Muslim writing in Hindi, its repercussions on the Hindi–Urdu debate and the role of Hindi in the Hindutva movement.

The second characteristic of Minor Literature, "the connection of the individual to a political immediacy", is also missing. Politics exists in the novels, but it clearly does not have a fundamental role in the development of the protagonists' personalities and mental make-up. In *Kaisī āgī lagāī*, for example, the characters note the absurdities of ideology: "It's an interesting thing that when a comrade returns from the Soviet Union he is usually anti-communist, but when a person goes to America he returns a communist" (322). Rather, the few fault lines delineated in Wajahat's novels mark out social issues such as the position of Adivasis rather than religious or communal divisions. There is no Hindu–Muslim question hanging over the interactions between characters or in their experiences of larger systems like the university and state bureaucracy. The only time the tensions of minorityhood seep into a character's personality is when the protagonist is intellectually disabled, as in the short story *"Maiṁ hindū hūṁ"*, which will be discussed later in the chapter.

The third characteristic of Minor Literature, "the collective assemblage of enunciation", is also completely missing from Wajahat's novels. To choose one example, in *Sāt āsmān*, a novel about a Muslim journalist and his family history,

there is no sense that the text is trying or being forced to convey a larger story than that of one individual or family. Even though the protagonists and many of the secondary characters in the novel are Muslim, they are not portrayed as sharing any distinct characteristics, anxieties or common goals. In fact, in the narrative the characters' religion is often not given, and their names do not mark them as specifically Muslim or Hindu, thus defying the temptation of trying to link the story to a larger political context.

Not only does Deleuze and Guattari's approach not help in reading Wajahat's novels, then, but as I looked for ways of unearthing deeper layers of meaning, I realized that perhaps the desire to read the story of minority into these texts obscures more than it reveals. Many texts are written in a layered way, beckoning readers to go beyond the surface meaning and inviting them to search for deeper layers. Other texts, however, resist this process and insist on being read for what they are. In the introduction to a special issue on "Surface Reading" (2009), Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best argue: "A surface is what insists on being looked *at* rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through*" (9, emphasis in the original). I read their statement as positioning itself directly against Fredric Jameson's stance outlined in *The Political Unconscious*, according to which interpretation seeks "a latent meaning behind a manifest one" (60). Moreover, Marcus and Best disagree with Jameson's suggestion that the interpreter "rewrite the surface categories of a text in the stronger language of a more fundamental interpretive code" (*The Political Unconscious,* 60).

In my thesis, then, I propose to take the middle path and accept that some texts demand an unearthing of meaning, while allowing for texts such as Wajahat's, where there are no layers beckoning from below, to be read with a focus on their surface.

Wajahat's novels show that a Muslim writing in Hindi does not necessarily make a piece of writing Minor Literature. Borrowing Hélène Cixous' definition of *écriture feminine* is useful when thinking about authors who write

from a weakened or marginalized position but might not be producing Minor Literature:

> Great care must be taken in working on feminine writing not to get trapped by names: to be signed with a woman's name doesn't necessarily make a piece of writing feminine. It could quite well be masculine writing, and conversely, the fact that a piece of writing is signed with a man's name does not in itself exclude femininity. (52)

Cixous is writing about the dominant patriarchy and how it obviously influences women as well as men. In talking about Minor Literature, we are faced with a different structure of dominance, one that is connected with the idea of the nation and national belonging. On the surface it seems harder or even impossible for authors from a minority community to write in the majority's voice, since this mode of narration is predicated on an "us" and "them" and silences minority perspectives in obvious ways. Hindi literature would be different if it were not largely the domain of upper-caste Hindu males and took into account and represented equally the multitude of voices in the subcontinent. Of course there are different and marginalized voices, but they are always in dialogue with, or subservient to, the dominant narratives, which were shaped without them and over which they have little control. The only way to destabilize this control is by deterritorializing language, thus both exposing its power structure and creating a space for a more level playing field or even a new hierarchy.

While Hindi literature, like any other national literature, may be shaped by the majority, or the elite, it also depends on marginal voices in order to maintain the fiction that it gives voice to the nation. The elite are the arbiters of status, but without the participation of other, non-elite layers the elite would not have the legitimacy to claim to represent the whole, that is, the nation. Writers from marginalized positions are threatened with being incorporated

into a story larger than their own, and often this story is at odds with their own. This is the very reason that Deleuze and Guattari identify the need for deterritorialization in Minor Literature. Without undermining the rules, the text is at risk of being interpellated into the dominant national narrative, thus erasing the minor one in the process.

In a close reading of Wajahat's work, we are left with the question of what happens to the pressures of minority existence. How are they sublimated? How can narratives of minority figures function without deterritorialization? How can they function without creating a space and language that suits them rather than the more dominant forces? We can ask these questions and suggest that some individuals are sheltered from minority existence by their surroundings or by their intersectional identities. Did Wajahat's upbringing in Uttar Pradesh and education in Aligarh shelter him from the process of minoritization that was occurring while he was growing up? Did his Shia identity shield him from the very process of minoritization itself, since Shias are already a minority within Islam? Did his life in Delhi remove him from experiencing the consequences of the rise of Hindutva and the shockwaves of major historical events such as the demolition of the Babri Masjid? When an author who sets out to write fiction in the realist mode, as Wajahat undoubtedly does, shows very little interest in contemporary political upheavals, we are left with unanswered questions. We now turn to three of Wajahat's novels in order to continue asking these questions.

3 Sāt āsmān

Sāt āsmān (*Seven Skies,* 1996), Wajahat's first novel, published when he was fifty, is a multi-generational narrative about a Shia Muslim *zamindar* family in an unnamed town close to Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh. In the novel Wajahat gives an historical overview of the trajectory of landowning Muslims in north India

and their decline following independence and the abolition of the *zamindari* system. However, he tells the story very factually, with no discernible agenda or pathos, so that it reads more like a summary of events. The novel is narrated by an unnamed protagonist, the scion of the family who works as a journalist. After detailed and long-winded descriptions of intrigues and family feuds, the narrative arrives at the independence period and the abolition of the *zamindari* system.[64] There is no nostalgia for the Ganga-Jamuni culture or the memories of the social harmony that allegedly existed before the rise of nationalism in north India. The family slowly but surely loses its land and status partly due to the impact of government regulations, but mostly because of the utter haplessness and gullibility of the family's patriarchs, who seem to make every possible mistake and to be cheated by everyone they come across. The narrator is happily married and a successful journalist. His father remains in the village still fighting court cases over their ancestral land, and once in a while sells off more land in order to cover his legal expenses.[65] The father wants the narrator, his eldest son, to move back to the village, but the narrator has no interest in this. In the last pages of the novel it transpires that the narrator has been offered a job as the Europe correspondent for his newspaper (251). After hearing the news his father dies of a heart attack, just a few weeks after the death of his wife, thus bringing the older generation to an end.

Throughout the novel there are scattered references to Hindu–Muslim relations, but these are always part of a longer list of issues and never achieve prominence. When there is a celebration, other Hindu landlords are invited and Hindu cooks prepare the food for them (50). On another occasion, a character

[64] For a discussion of the abolition of the *zamindari* system in Uttar Pradesh, see Metcalf. For a more recent survey of the effects of the redistribution of wealth which focuses on Bihar but is relevant for *Sāt āsmān*, see A.N. Sharma.

[65] The phenomenon of Shia *zamindar* families losing their money in court cases following the abolition of the *zamindari* system in 1952 is a documented reality. See Verniers (109-111).

called Mushtak, who worked as an orderly for the deputy collector, recalls feeding beef to a Hindu:

> "Mushtak, what are you cooking?" I folded my hands together and said "Meat, sir"; the deputy sahib said, "Give me some, I want to taste it." Brother, the problem was that the meat was beef. The deputy was Hindu. How would I feed him beef? (19)

The deputy collector insists and happily eats the beef. It never becomes clear whether he knew the meat was beef or whether he thought it was something else. Mushtak takes great pleasure in recalling this episode, which plays so well on Brahmanical fears. Even though this short passage contains the potential for offence, I do not read it as a challenge to the existing order since it is not followed by any similar episode.

As I have already suggested, one possible explanation for the lack of minority tension is that the family are Shia and that, as a minority within a minority, they do not experience a uniform "othering." The fact that the novel takes place in Awadh, which was ruled by a Shia dynasty, suggests that Shia landlords constituted the hegemonic elite.[66] The novel is plot-driven, with events chasing one another and becoming more and more lurid, with no discernable change or development in the characters.

There seems to be no self-reflexivity in the writing either. The characters do not develop in response to the many experiences that are described but remain the same throughout. The storyline, or plot, is so simple that, at times, it makes the narrative read like a list of events. For example, the creation of Pakistan is mentioned (155), but the family's patriarch refuses to go there, and this is the sole reference to this event, which so dramatically changed the status

[66] Pellò, as well as Bayly, track the relations between Shias, Sunnis and Hindus in nineteenth-century Lucknow and beyond, showing that the trajectory of relations between Shias and other communities is distinct and needs to be differentiated from that of Sunni communities.

of Muslims in north India. Interestingly, for a novel devoid of political tension and discussions about the position of Muslims in independent India, the title *Sāt āsmān* (*Seven Skies*) references a well-known couplet by Mirza Ghalib, which is itself a reference to the seven levels of heaven in Islam:

> rāt din gardiś meṃ haiṃ sāt āsmāṃ
> ho rahegā kuc na kuc, ghabrāeṃ kyā? (Rusell, 25)
>
> Day and night the heavens turn
> Something is bound to happen, why fear?[67]

The title leaves open the question of Wajahat's political stance in narrating a story about Muslims in Hindi. He is not erasing the links with an Urdu Muslim past, but at the same time he does not seem to be interested in preserving that past. The only other links to Urdu poetic taste in the book are the couplets at the beginning of each chapter. Yet the language of the couplets is very different from that of the novel itself, reminding the reader that the couplet and the novel belong to two distinct genres with different histories.

Placing *Sāt āsmān* side by side with Manzoor Ahtesham's *Dāstān e lāpatā* presents an opportunity for a brief comparison of two novels published at the same time by Muslim authors who belong to the same generation in order to see if Minor Literature can serve as an entry point into these texts as a related body of work. Whereas in *Dāstān e lāpatā* there is a palpable sense of tension, fear and crisis, *Sāt āsmān* is completely devoid of it. To highlight this point, while discussing Ahtesham's work I argued that the specific historical context, the changing and deteriorating position of Muslims in Bhopal and North India, was crucial in interpreting his work. *Sāt āsmān,* and Wajahat's other novels, portray the complete opposite: they focus on Muslim protagonists, but the

[67] Transliterated from the Devanagari for the sake of uniformity.

issues these characters face have very little to do with their religious or communal identity, or with the political upheavals around them. These novels are rooted in their time; they are written in the realistic mode and reference historical events but from completely different perspectives. Wajahat's style of dealing with politics comes out in an even more pronounced fashion in *Kaisī āgī lagāī.*

4 Kaisī āgī lagāī

Asghar Wajahat's website provides the following description of his life. Part of it is exactly the same as the narrative of *Kaisī āgī lagāī* (*How did the Fire Start?*, 2004), suggesting that it is an autobiographical novel:

> I have done my high school from Fatehpur and then went to Aligarh Muslim Unversity (sic) for higher studies. In 1967 I did B.Sc. and later on my M.A. in Hindi. After my master's degree I came to Delhi to become an (sic) journalist. I did freelance journalism for two years but could not find the job (sic). So then I came back to Fatehpur and started farming. During this period I became more interested in politics and contested a local body election in which I was defeated. (Asghar Wajahat, accessed 20/06/2018)

During a 2011 interview with *Dawn* newspaper in Pakistan, Wajahat discussed his work and the motivation behind his novels:

> I am working on a trilogy now and have published its first two novels [*Kaisī āgī lagāī* and *Barkhā racāī* (2009)]. It is the story of my generation which had a great ambition to become relevant somehow or the other because it feared that it had lost its moorings and wanted to gain relevance. The final volume will be a flash forward of how things should be. The real story is not what actually takes place but how the characters imagine it to be. That is the true spirit of fiction for me. (Dawn, accessed 18/7/2018)

Kaisī āgī lagāī is a classic *Bildungsroman* focusing on a young man going to university and opening up to the world. As mentioned above, the novel closely mirrors Asghar Wajahat's personal life, and in the introduction Wajahat says that it is the first instalment of a trilogy. Apart from the protagonist's name, Sajid, it seems that the events are autobiographical. Again, just as in *Sāt āsmān*, *Kaisī āgī lagāī* was published in the aftermath of communal violence, in this case the 2002 pogroms in Gujarat. In the introduction Wajahat writes that the novel was composed while he was teaching Hindi in Budapest in 1996-97. However, there are no traces of the Babri Masjid events or references to the rise of Hindutva ideology. Just like the protagonist of *Sāt āsmān*, Sajid grows up in an unnamed town in Uttar Pradesh in a Shia family. He is an only son, and his father works as a deputy collector. The narrative starts with his arrival at Aligarh Muslim University to start his BSc, and the first page of the novel simply states: "In those days the atmosphere of a Hindu–Muslim riot had built up" (13). His introduction to Aligarh and to life outside his home starts with a riot, but his lack of emotion or excitement while narrating the riot leaves the reader with the impression that this was nothing serious or important. As in *Sāt āsmān*, the position of being Muslim in India occupies an insignificant part of the narrative, and the riot at the beginning of the novel seems to have no special implication. Instead, Sajid's story of his coming of age revolves around his introduction to—in no specific order—communism, art, alcohol, women and, in a brief episode, men as well. It seems that the riot at the beginning of the novel has no special weight and is soon forgotten.

The first half of the novel describes the life of Sajid and his two best friends during their undergraduate years and reads like a summary. The friends are both Shia like him and meet after attending a compulsory religious class. During his BSc he meets some older students, one of whom encourages him to write in Hindi. Sajid manages to get a story published and decides to do a Master's degree in Hindi at Aligarh. The character who encourages him most

and who Sajid is deeply grateful to is K.P. Singh. He is the first person Sajid sends a telegram to celebrating having his story published in *Dharmayug*, the leading Hindi magazine of the time (325). Interestingly we know that K.P. Singh is a real figure and that he and Wajahat even interviewed Mohan Rakesh together in 1968.[68] During his Master's degree Sajid befriends a communist activist and becomes interested in the party while never becoming a member. He continues to write fiction and graduates from his Master's degree at the top of his class, after which he decides to become a Hindi journalist and moves to Delhi. Despite his connections and talent he fails to make ends meet and eventually returns to his home town, "the same way a soldier returns, wounded, degraded, hungry, hopeless and with no future" (390). However, this is not a narrative of defeat. In *Barkhā racāī,* the second instalment, we discover that Sajid will return to Delhi and become a successful journalist.

Sajid experiences the stock rites of passage of drinking alcohol, discovering sex, being exposed to the shortcomings of ideology, and finally suffering the harsh financial reality of trying to make a living.[69] His different identities, Muslim, Shia, middle class, small-town resident, etc. are rarely questioned and do not appear to be a source of tension for him or his surroundings. Moreover, there is very little introspection in the novel, and the timeline progresses in linear fashion, with no flashbacks or prolepses. Sajid experiences hardships but no existential crises; the tone remains constant whether he is describing personal experiences or other, external events. Even though he is a first person narrator he maintains the same distance from personal and social issues. For example, describing the first time he has sex,

[68] See Singh and Wajahat.

[69] For both Ahtesham and Wajahat, alcohol plays a central part in becoming independent, and drinking scenes are important moments in their novels.

Sajid is worried that he might have forced himself onto the servant girl and asks himself, using the English word, if what he did constitutes rape:

> Now my fear started growing. What have I done? The terrible and terrifying consequences that could develop. Defamation (*badnāmī*) […] disgrace (*apmān*) […] the law punishes rapists (*balātkār karnevāle*) seriously […] a cold sweat started on my brow. (246)

The girl continues coming to his room, and he seems to conclude that it was consensual, but his relief is stated rather than expressed by a change of pace or tone.

Sajid's two friends from Aligarh play a major role in the narrative and represent two different options for living one's life. The first, Shakil, goes back home after his degree, joins his father's pharmacy and starts a family. Ahmed, the other friend, plays a much more important role in Sajid's life. Ahmed comes from an aristocratic family in Lucknow that has fallen on hard times. They still have high social status but are so poor that they find it hard to pay Ahmed's meagre university fees. Ahmed's decadent behaviour is reminiscent of the descriptions of the zamindar family in *Sāt āsmān*:

> The food was twenty rupees. The taxi meter came to seventeen. He also bought two packets of cigarettes. That means that in two hours he cut a one hundred rupee bill in half. But since when did Ahmed care about these things? (298)

Even though Ahmed is poor and has to borrow from his friends, he spends whatever money is in his pocket and still lives with a sense of privilege. Indeed, the main interest Wajahat seems to take in his Muslim identity is in charting the decline of the old aristocratic order, rather than describing their current predicament. However, the tone used to describe this decline is lacking in

nostalgia, and there is no emotional appeal for a return to a "golden age". For example, when a teacher at Aligarh discovers who Ahmed is, he says:

> "Aha, are you not the son of Raja Argala Sir Syed Iqbal Ahmed?" "I am", Ahmed said. "Who doesn't know Sir Syed Iqbal … had you said before… Oh well… How is Raja Sahab?" (19)

The teacher recognizes that Ahmed comes from an illustrious family, but at the same time accepts that this is a thing of the past and does not treat Ahmed differently, but addresses him with the informal "you" (*tum*) like the other students. After university Ahmed marries a Bengali Hindu girl from a wealthy and well-connected family. There is no mention of any tension over the fact that the marriage is inter-religious, and Ahmed's father in it participates with regal pomp (296). Ahmed appears in Sajid's life from time to time, continuing to expose him to the existence of a class in which money and religion have very different meanings. For example, Ahmed's father holds forth on the subject of religion:

> Just last week I had a date for my court case. I arrived in court and saw that the judge had a big tilak on his forehead. I immediately told my lawyer to put forward a request to change the court in which the case is presented. A person who believes in 'supernatural powers' cannot deliver justice. (100)

As readers we might think that Ahmed's father would prefer to fight his case in a court not presided over by a Hindu judge who proclaims his religion in such a public way. However, Ahmed's father's complaint is different. For him religion is the problem, not a specific religion or the danger that a Hindu might rule against a Muslim out of prejudice. His whole speech is in Hindi, but he says "supernatural powers" in English, thus positioning himself in line with a

European secular stance and not in a traditional Indian one, be it Muslim or Hindu.

Another opportunity to show how the government might target Muslims in *Kaisī āgī lagāī* is also pre-empted. A pious Muslim shopkeeper is arrested for refusing to stock contraceptives distributed through a new government scheme. He gets into a fight with the government official who tries to force him to accept them: "The population is growing because of people like you, and you refuse to stock contraceptives [...]. The official tore some of Haji ji's flowing beard off, and Haji's nail marks were visible on the official's face" (150). After the fight Haji ji is arrested, yet there is no clear Hindu–Muslim tension here: "People like you" can easily be read as a euphemism for Muslims or any other minority group for that matter, and the government official is not named; he could be either Hindu or Muslim. Is he saying "People like you" in reference to Haji ji's piety? Haji ji's Muslim identity is highlighted both by his name and by his "flowing beard", yet the official remains unspecified. Is he a bigoted Hindu or a Muslim who feels shamed by his co-religionist's piety? These questions are left unanswered. In the ensuing struggle to free Haji ji from jail no one makes any attempt to target him for being Muslim, nor does any politician seek to capitalize on the event and be seen to be defending Muslim interests. There is only a description of how inefficient the system is and how the only way to secure Haji ji's release is through knowing someone who has contacts in the government. The remark "the population is growing because of people like you" remains undeveloped. Muslims are routinely blamed for having large families. Is this one of these cases? Sajid's laconic narration leaves all these questions open.

Sajid himself does not experience discrimination or tension due to his religious background in any of his encounters in Aligarh as a Shia or as a Muslim in Delhi. Rather than describing Hindu–Muslim tensions, the vast majority of the narrative space devoted to politics in *Kaisī āgī lagāī* deals instead

with communism. Again and again Sajid is present in night-long debates over the merits of communism, arguments about the viability of Marxism and criticism of the Communist Party. The vast majority of the action in the novel occurs in Aligarh, and it is through interactions with students, teachers and university characters that Sajid develops his world view. For example, he feels as if he is meeting "a living legend" when he meets a famous communist activist (181). A friend tells him: "The Congress Party used to have people like that [hard-working and dedicated] but now they are all freeloaders" (179). When he returns home to his village for summer vacation a friend of his asks him: "Sajid Miyan, tell me this, is there any cure for these damn riots?" Sajid answers by saying that the only way forward is to "wake class consciousness in the people" (146). Sajid never becomes a real activist but only repeats lectures he has heard until the point where he becomes disillusioned. Sajid's development continues after Aligarh as well, and this is described in *Barkhā rachāī*, the focus of the next section.

5 Barkhā racāī

Barkhā rachāī (*Creating the Monsoon,* 2009), the second part of the trilogy, is a direct continuation of *Kaisī āgī lagāī* with only slight narrative changes. It tells Sajid's story after leaving university by focusing on his career and love life. The material here seems less autobiographical, since we know that Wajahat did not work as a journalist but as an author and academic. Recall the interview quoted above: "The real story is not what actually takes place but how the characters imagine it to be. That is the true spirit of fiction for me" (Dawn, accessed 18/7/2018). Rather than a realistic representation, *Barkhā racāī* indeed includes strong elements of fantasy. The flat tone and unadorned style are a direct continuation of *Kaisī āgī lagāī*; however, while purporting to be realistic, the events often seem exaggerated, and the three main characters seem to lead

extraordinarily charmed lives with successful careers. Strikingly, the characters do not develop, the changes they undergo are external, and they do not experience any process of self-realization. There is no change in their behaviour and no indication that they come to terms with the tension between self and society.

The novel starts off where *Kaisī āgī lagāī* ended, with Sajid back in his home town at the age of twenty-six (11). He decides to move back to his ancestral village where his family has some land and try his hand at farming. His experiences there force him to face questions of ideology versus profit: "So what shall I do? University educated, believer in Marxist theory, fighter for justice, sympathizer of the proletariat or money [maker]?" (14). Even though he poses this question, there is never a hint of an answer or a denouement marking a position regarding ideology and money-making. After an optimistic start where it seems he will become a successful farmer, unseasonal rains ruin his hopes, and at the same time he is offered a position as a journalist in an English-language paper in Delhi. There is also a brief section describing a failed attempt to enter local politics. Sajid becomes a respected journalist and eventually the assistant editor of *The Nation*¸ a fictional English newspaper. He publishes four books about the countryside focusing on Dalit and Adivasi issues (135). There is no description of the content of the books, and their having being written is mentioned in a list-like fashion, as are many of Sajid's activities and accomplishments.

After Sajid establishes himself, he marries a British Indian woman from a wealthy Muslim family (73). He visits her in London and is taken aback by the grandeur of the city. Experiencing mixed feelings, he reminds himself that "it is a result of looting Asia and Africa" that England is so advanced (73). After seven years of marriage a son is born and is named Hira, or "Diamond". Sajid says: "I liked the name since it was outside the Hindu–Muslim divide" (97). However, like other moments with the potential for exploring "the Hindu–

Muslim divide" the comment stands alone, undeveloped. Hira grows up in the UK and rarely sees Sajid, neither occupying an important place in the other's life. Within one page of the mention of Hira's birth he is already studying at university and is interested in social causes (98). Sajid and his wife drift apart, and after she moves back to London he has two long affairs with Hindu women (211). All these separations from women and from his son do not seem to touch Sajid, who remains as detached from his personal life as he is from the political atmosphere around him. Ahmed, his aristocratic friend from his university days, rises to the rank of ambassador and continues having colorful affairs with the most wealthy and beautiful women. Shakil leaves his family pharmacy business, joins politics and eventually becomes a minister in the central government. Shakil's son wants to succeed him and is behind a botched assassination attempt in which Shakil is shot six times but nevertheless manages to survive.

As in *Kaisī āgī lagāī*, here too Muslim identity exists as merely one factor among many others and is not the focus of debate or tension. The majority of the characters are Muslim, but their issues, such as career, unemployment, success and failure in love, are not differentiated from those affecting other Hindu characters. The novel revolves around the familiar themes of relationships, social status, money and the desire to achieve something for oneself.

One of the few references to the different position of Muslims comes when, during breaks from farming in the village, Sajid describes visiting his hometown: "In these *mehfils* we talked about everything in the world. Politics, the state of Muslims, the Soviet Union, and the China and America debate" (17). However, the main ideological questions that preoccupy Sajid have to do with inequality, the position of women and the countryside. On a research trip to Bihar his interlocutor says: "What we have done to the Adivasis is what the Americans did to the 'Red Indians'. But no one believes this since the people

who know it are the very ones who committed the crime" (85). Sajid goes on to publish a series of reports about the state of Adivasis that cause uproar in Delhi (88). While Sajid acknowledges the fact that Muslims in India are marginalized, for him they do not belong in the same categories as Adviasis. In fact, Sajid seems to be interested in other, more marginalized groups.

One of the few references to the situation of Indian Muslims appears in a discussion between Sajid and Shakil. Shakil explains to Sajid the complexity of being a Muslim politician: "... you have to make your own circle ... in which everyone belongs ... If you don't have a beard, then people don't see you as Muslim ... if they don't see you as Muslim, then the political career is gone ..." (ellipses in the original, 59). Later on, while watching Shakil in action, giving orders and organizing a delegation of five hundred persons, Sajid observes that Shakil's use of language has changed: "I felt that he had started to speak a good Hindi" (*maiṁne mahsūs kiyā ki vah acchī hindī bolne lagā hai*, 70). But what does this "good Hindi" mean here? Does it mean that Shakil's language has become more Sanskritized, that is, more in tune with the national "mainstream", or more Arabicized, that is, more in tune with the Muslim politics he represents? Another interesting fact is that Shakil's Shia identity seems to have been subsumed within a generic Muslim identity that elides any problems that might arise from this.

Sajid goes back to his home town after a long absence and is appalled by what he sees:

> What are the three main problems here? Poverty, poverty and poverty. Because there are no jobs: corruption, corruption and corruption. The powerful get away with corruption since no one can lay a finger on them. Racism and sectarianism (*jātivād aur sampradāyvād*), both are weapons in the hands of the politicians who create a small state with it. In these conditions the life of the simple man turns into hell and he has no way to escape. (180)

Sajid's focus on poverty and corruption shows that he identifies the intersection of money and politics as being more powerful and therefore more important than the minority position. In 1989 Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" while trying to capture the predicament of oppressed communities, especially women of colour. Intersectionality contains the idea that multiple identities come together to create an aggregate, which cannot be simply defined by one category.[70] Using the concept of intersectionality helps clarify Wajahat's position and his claim that it is not simply Muslim identity or simply poverty which are the problem. It is rather their intersection that creates a potent mixture. This point is crucial for reading Wajahat's position regarding minority. It is obvious from his novels that the position of the narrator is excluded or exempted from the pressures of minorityhood. In these novels Wajahat and his narrators describe marginalization only from the outside. We can say that for Wajahat the sense of being minority only comes to the fore when it intersects with other weakened positions—namely poverty. Perhaps this explains the journalistic tone and lack of introspection in his novels. Since these characters are protected by class, relative affluence and education, minorityhood only becomes evident when it is compounded with other marginalizing factors.

Sajid wakes up in the middle of the night with, "the same old question… The question is what can I do that will be good for me, for others and for marginalized people? What can I do that will make me happy? What will make me feel as if I've done something in life?" (223). Sajid can ask this question since, while he identifies the gravity of the situation of "marginalized people" and feels linked to it, he is still external to it due to his privileged position.

Barkhā racāī ends with Sajid waxing eloquent about the virtues of the countryside and telling his servant to pack up since they are moving to the

[70] See Crenshaw.

village. This is the same ending as in *Kaisī āgī lagāī*. The servant asks what to pack, and he says "Nothing, we have everything we need there" (231).[71]

What happens when we read Wajahat's non-dissensual *Bildungsromane* alongside his considerably angrier stories? The final part of this chapter turns to Wajahat's short stories, which present a very different attitude to minority tensions.

6 Wajahat's Short Stories

> The short story is the most purely artistic form; it expresses the ultimate meaning of all artistic creation as *mood*, as the very sense and content of the creative process, but it is rendered abstract for that very reason. It sees absurdity in all its undisguised and unadorned nakedness, and the exorcising power of this view, without fear or hope, gives it the consecration of form. (Lukács, 51-52)

In *The Theory of the Novel* (1974 [1920]) Lukács touches upon the power of the short story when he says that it "sees absurdity in all its undisguised and unadorned nakedness." Wajahat's fiction demonstrates a stark distribution of subject matter according to genre. While his novels rarely engage in politics or social criticism (apart from a brief mention of Adivasis), many of his short stories do by highlighting the absurd realities created by different forms and threats of violence, whether violence against Muslims or women.

This section will discuss how to approach this division between novels and short stories and then proceeds to a close reading of specific short stories. It will also include a close reading of "*Sarhad ke is pār*" (This Side of the Border) by Nasira Sharma, since she and Wajahat both deal with similar themes, namely the occurrence and description of madness. Both Wajahat's and Sharma's

[71] The third part of the trilogy has not yet been published, and I do not know when or if this is going to happen.

stories carry on an intertextual dialogue with Sadat Hasan Manto, whose oeuvre looms large over short-story writing in Urdu and Hindi, especially when dealing with madness and the figure of the madman.

Aamir Mufti singles out the idea of the "fragment" and argues that the short story form necessarily has a different relationship to the idea of nationhood than the novel. He describes Manto's works by means of this idea:

> Earlier I argued, following Lukács, that what is distinct about the short story as a "minor epic form" is that it "singles out a fragment from the immeasurable infinity of the events of life," thereby making possible a relation of subject to totality which is distinct from that of the realist novel. (208)

For Mufti the fact that the short deals with a single "fragment" of life precludes it from being incorporated into the larger story of national belonging. I will read the following short stories by asking whether they really are just about a "fragment" of life and whether, in focusing on a moment rather than a process, they convey a different message. Following Jameson, I will argue that the short-story form influences content and that Wajahat's stories and vignettes offer different formal solutions to social contradiction.

6.1 "*Za<u>kh</u>m*"

In the short story "*Za<u>kh</u>m*" ("Wound," published in the short-story collection *Maiṁ hindū hūṁ* 2006), Wajahat focuses on a riot that takes place in Delhi between Muslims and Hindus and on the futile response of anti-communalists which result in an evening program called "*sāmpradāyiktā virodhī sammelan*" or "anti-communalism gathering" (7). While the high register of Hindi is commonly used for naming these events, this register itself reveals the auspices of the meeting. That is, the organizers do not belong to the classes involved or that have been affected by such riots. The story shifts the focus from one of

inter-communal tension to the gulf between rich and poor and highlights how minorityhood only creates vulnerability when it is intersected with poverty. The narrator remembers the sign from a previous gathering that occurred four years earlier and comments: "A white piece of paper covered the old date and had the new date on it" (16). This laconic observation makes possible an expression of the futility of these events and a comment on the cyclical nature of riots and similar gatherings. However, the voice is unemotional, simply providing an analytical overview of the state of affairs, similar to a newspaper report. The narrator, who remains unnamed and seems to be a Muslim like Wajahat himself, describes his friendship with Mukhtar, a tailor from his home town. Mukhtar is also the name of tailor friend of Sajid in *Barkhā racāī*, whose life story echoes that of Mukhtar in this story, that is, they both moved to Delhi for work (104-5). There is every reason to believe that this is the same character, something that again blurs the boundaries between Wajahat's fiction and his autobiographical writing. Mukhtar is

> an ardent supporter of the Muslim League and believes that the creation of Pakistan was a good thing. He is proud of the fact that Pakistan is a Muslim country and thinks it is better than India. (9)

The narrator knows how to deal with people like this: "I lived in Aligarh Muslim University and gained experience from being part of the students' federation. I knew that the only answer to emotions and anger was patience and logic" (9). The narrator is above identity politics and is conveying other people's views rather than showing how his own Muslim identity and the way it is construed by society affects his own inner life. The relationship between the narrator and Mukhtar brings to the fore the question of the divide between the secular Muslim intelligentsia and working-class religious Muslims. This is highlighted in the following passage:

> Three months after the riots a gathering was organized in order to promote peace between the communities. I thought of bringing Mukhtar along with me to the gathering. He had to take a day off, and we both went to the real capital of the capital, the part of the capital with wide clean roads, shade-giving trees, sparkling sidewalks […]. Inside there were lots of people milling around, university students, professors, heads of research institutes, big government officers […] artists, writers, journalists […]. There were very few people in the crowd who were like Mukhtar. Perhaps none at all—it was impossible to say. (15-16)

Again, Wajahat highlights the class division. The poor are those who suffer during riots, but those who participate in peace-building activities are the upper classes. This division seems insurmountable, and Wajahat identifies it as the main problem, rather than religious division or the marginalization of Muslims. In other words, it is the intersectionality of poverty and minorityhood that creates the fault line. Being Muslim but privileged is very different from being Muslim and poor.

The narrator and Mukhtar sit through long speeches extolling communal unity, while Mukhtar scratches the wound on his head, his *za<u>kh</u>m,* where acid was thrown at him during the riots. Finally they both leave the hall before the speeches end, Mukhtar complaining that "Someone should have made a declaration of action," rather than just spouting lofty speeches (19). The narrator asks Mukhtar why he is complaining. The story ends with, "Saying nothing, he bent his head towards me. He brushed his hair aside. In front of me was a red wound that was dripping with fresh blood" (19).

"*Za<u>kh</u>m*" portrays the gap between those affected by racism and riots and those who attend rallies against them. The narrator, or Wajahat himself, is aware of this divide, and the story becomes as much about the divide between the elites who talk about communal problems and the poor who suffer from them as it is about violence itself. Moreover, as the dripping blood tells us, this is an urgent problem. The riots might have ended three months earlier, but the wounds are still bleeding, and there is a need for action rather than lofty talk

that has nothing to do with the reality on the ground. The image of the wound brings us back to the representation of disease in Manzoor Ahtesham's work. Here, instead of a mysterious disease, we have a clear of representation of the dangers of being "othered." However, by describing a fresh wound in this way Wajahat keeps the narrative very much on the immediate "conscious" level, turning it into a call for action rather than a literary exploration of the effects of minoritization. The following short stories, however, combine direct appeals against violence with explorations of the effects of tension on the mind itself.

6.2 The Theme of Madness

In this section I read three different short stories—"*Maiṁ hindū hūṁ*," *Stories from the Lunatic Asylum* and "*Sarhad ke is pār*"—that deal with madness. In the case of "Stories from the Lunatic Asylum", perhaps vignettes would be a better description. Following Lukács, the vignette is a more condensed form than the short story and it delivers "absurdity in all its undisguised and unadorned nakedness" without the distraction added by a plot (51).

Borrowing Mufti's discussion of Manto, these stories by Asghar Wajahat and Nasira Sharma could also be described as an "examination of the shifting borders of madness and insanity in a world that has become unhinged" (201). In Manto's famous story "*Tobā ṭek singh*" (1955), it takes a madman to stand up to society's madness and to refuse to participate in the partition of India and Pakistan. In Wajahat and Sharma's stories there is no dramatic event like partition, just the grinding reality of recurring riots in which the Muslim community is targeted by Hindus who are often their neighbours. The depth of the fault line between communities becomes clear during the riots and the curfew that accompany them. This unhinging is manifested in one individual protagonist in the case of "*Maiṁ hindū hūṁ*" and "*Sarhad ke is pār*", but the aim is to show how crazy society has become, rather than explore the loss of sanity

of a specific individual. This madman, as a liminal figure, is allowed to act and to say things that are impossible for those enmeshed in society's rules and expectations. Sharma and Wajahat use this figure in a similar way to show how difficult Muslim existence in India is and how riots bring all the tensions of minority existence to the surface.

6.3 "Stories from the Lunatic Asylum"[72]

Wajahat uses the trope of the madman to express uncomfortable truths in his collection of ten vignettes entitled *Stories from the Lunatic Asylum* (2002). These vignettes range in length from three to four lines to a maximum of three paragraphs. Only one deals with Hindu–Muslim tensions in a direct way, the rest offering broad criticisms of different problems in Indian society. Like the denouement of "*Tobā tek singh*", Manto's famous partition story, these brief portraits, or snapshots, revolve around lunatics escaping the asylum. The fragmentary style is very similar to Manto's *Siyāh hāshiye* (Black Lines, 1948), his first attempts at writing after partition. The length and tone are very similar, that is, they are very short and ironic. The form here is crucial, because by doing away with everything but the most basic information, the message stands out in all its starkness. The elliptical style, though written in prose, works in a similar way to poetry: in the shortest and most condensed form possible, all that is left is trenchant criticism of problems that have become normalized. The liminal characters, the madmen, end up exposing social madness rather than their own individual disease. The seventh vignette deals with an inmate who settles back into society but does not know if he is Hindu or Muslim:

[72] I have not been able to find the Hindi original of "Stories from the Lunatic Asylum". I am therefore using the translation by Rakshanda Jalil in *Lies: Half Told* (2002), the only collection of Wajahat's stories to have been translated into English.

> The leaders of the community decided to split him in half, but they soon realized that doing so would kill him. Then he would be neither Hindu nor Muslim. So they hit upon another idea—he would be Muslim one day and Hindu the next. The day he was Hindu he would sweep the temple with a broom. The day he was Muslim he would sweep the mosque. As a result, he never had the time to clean his own house. (116)

We can read this as a way of stressing that the incessant focus on religion means that there is no time to do basic things such as looking after oneself. The absurdity of the communities' resolution provides a humorous critique not only of the inter-faith struggle but of the claims of religion itself, which in this story are made at the expense of the individual's own well-being.

This example is the only one of the ten that deals directly with the tension over Hindu–Muslim identity. In line with Wajahat's focus on liberal politics and marginalized groups in his novels, Muslim identity issues exist but do not take centre stage. For example, the eighth vignette tells the story of a madman who publishes a matrimonial ad and is flooded with proposals. Everybody is surprised by the vast number of women correspondents who are willing to marry a madman. When one girl is asked about her willingness to marry such a person, she replied "that in case the madman chose to pour kerosene over her after marriage and burn her to death, at least it could be said that her husband was mad" (117). No one will be able to describe her murder as suicide, which is so often the case with violence within the family and dowry murders. The use of short punchy stories to bring to centre stage the plight of those who usually remain voiceless is a clear link to Manto's style. The next story, "*Maiṁ hindū hūṁ*", is one of Wajahat's most powerful and, like the vignettes mentioned above, uses the figure of the madman in order to expose social madness.

6.4 *"Maiṁ hindū hūṁ"*

"Maiṁ hindū hūṁ" was published in the renowned Hindi literary magazine *Hans* in 2002 and later in a short-story collection under the same name (*Maiṁ hindū hūṁ* 2006). The combination of the title, 'I am a Hindu', with the clearly Muslim name of the author immediately arouses attention and curiosity. This is the first instance I am aware of in which Wajahat plays with his name or a character's name in order to deterritorialize deep-seated assumptions about Hindi and the meaning of being a Hindu.[73] I assume that the story was written in response to the 2002 riots in Gujarat. Another story in the collection, "*Śāh ālam camp kī rūheṁ*" (The Ghosts of Shah Alam Camp) is definitely a response to the massacres in Ahmedabad and refers to them directly.

"*Maiṁ hindū hūṁ*" tells the story of Saifu, a Muslim teenager who is mentally challenged and who lives with his relatives in an unnamed town in Uttar Pradesh. There has just been a wave of riots, and the town is under curfew. At night the teenage boys patrol the *mohalla's* roofs in order to ward off potential attacks by their Hindu neighbours. Some boys, or young men, enjoy scaring Saifu with stories about the way Hindus torture Muslims when they catch them. These stories leave a deep impression on Saifu, and he starts having nightmares which cause him to wake up screaming "in such a way that would even raise the dead from their graves" (35). Saifu's nightmares increase, and he is obviously deeply affected by the horror stories and the tense atmosphere in the neighbourhood. One morning, during the two-hour break in the curfew in which the residents are allowed to buy supplies, Saifu makes a scene in the market by begging some soldiers stationed there to take him with them, insisting at the top of his voice, "I am a Hindu, I am a Hindu..." (*Maiṁ hindū*

[73] On another level the title can also be read as playing with the title of Kancha Ilaiah's *Why I am not a Hindu* (1996), a polemic against the Hindu agenda of incorporating Dalits as Hindus even against their will.

hūṁ, 41-42). Wajahat ingeniously uses Saifu's simple-mindedness in order to show the depth of the psychological damage caused by the riots. Rather than reading this as merely a desire to escape being a victim, I read this call of "I am a Hindu, I am a Hindu" as exposing how devastating the tensions of being a minority are: they are strong enough to unsettle one's own identity and make one question it. Saifu, from his position in the margins of society as an adopted relative with impaired functioning, shows how mad the world has become and what tensions Muslims must face in times of communal violence. There are no Hindus in this story; the agents of Saifu's terror are other Muslim youths, who are actually getting rid of, or acting out, their own tensions and fears by teasing Saifu. He becomes for them a way to channel their own anxieties, and the unravelling of his mind is merely an exaggerated expression of what is going through the minds of other youths who are trapped in the same situation.

I now turn to a reading of a short story by Nasira Sharma, which, like "*Maiṁ hindū hūṁ*", occurs during the heightened tensions that accompany rioting and curfews and focuses on a mentally unstable protagonist.

6.5 *"Sarhad ke is pār"*

"Sarhad ke is pār" (This Side of the Border), published in the collection *Patthar galī* (*Stone Alley*, 1986), is a short story focused on Rehan, who has become mad because of a failed love story and a lack of employment prospects, even though he received a first in his MA (113). While Saifu, the protagonist of "*Maiṁ hindū hūṁ*", exposes the tensions of being a Muslim during riots through his being a simpleton, Rehan's madness, though serving the same function as Saifu's, comes out of an educated world view and sense of despair. Even through Rehan is described as mad, he can still distinguish between good and evil and chooses to put himself in danger for his ideals. This is the opposite of Saifu, who is portrayed as being reduced to such terror that he can only think of his

own personal safety. I read Rehan's story as representing the intersectional pressures on Muslim youth: "Unemployment, unfulfilled love and unfaithfulness all drove him crazy" (113). While this quote does not mention minorityhood, as will become obvious from passages below, the position of Muslims in India is paramount in Rehan's mind. The story's message of minority tension is conveyed by Rehan's madness, and the atmosphere of riots and curfew add an urgency to it.

Rehan falls in love with Suraiya while they are both BA students, but she is being married off to an officer in Pakistan. The reason her family refuses to let them marry is because Rehan comes from a lower class and has no job. The story takes place after the family's refusal, when Suraiya is about to move to Pakistan for good and Rehan's family and neighbours already consider him mad. Five years of job searching and the feeling of being cheated of, and by, his love drive him over the brink. These events take place against the backdrop of the Hindu–Muslim riots that engulf the unnamed city where they live.

Rehan's family is part of a small cluster of Muslim families in a predominantly Hindu neighbourhood who have good relations with their neighbours. During one of the curfews, imposed because of the riots, Rehan wanders around moonstruck enjoying the license given to liminal figures like him. He hears cries for help, and it emerges that three Muslims youths have kidnapped a young Hindu girl and are about to assault her. Rehan jumps over a wall and barges into the room where the girl is being held. The three youths recognize him as the neighbourhood madman and are surprised when he articulates very clearly, in a sane fashion, that they woul better let her go. They ask him why he is saving her, and he says he would save their sisters from the house of Hindus if need be. They then threaten him, but he manages to beat them and lock them in a room. Instead of taking the girl to the police, where her uncle is an officer, Rehan shows forethought and selflessness. He decides to take the girl home himself in order to avoid shaming her: "In his mind there

was only one thing—that the girl won't be disgraced" (*badnāmī*, 117). They move quietly from roof to roof escaping the patrolling police, and he deposits her safely at home, thus enabling her to avoid the horrible fate of "shamed" women. A short time later the three abductors find Rehan and murder him, throwing his body into a cesspit. Rehan's name means "scented" in Urdu, and the fact that he was found in a cesspit emphasizes how the current atmosphere takes the best Indian youths and destroys their lives. Rehan ends up rotting away in sewage "being eaten by worms" (120).

Rehan's madness remains a question throughout the story. Is he really mad? What does madness mean? Again and again he is shown doing "mad" things, but does this mean he is mad? For example, "When the curfew ended he went out [into the Hindu neighbourhood] wearing a sherwani" (113). This kind of behaviour shows that there is a method to his madness. He is mad because he is putting himself in danger, but he is also making a powerful statement that he does not fear his Hindu neighbours. The latter calm his mother's fears by saying that Rehan is like a son to them and that he will never be harmed (113). His position as a madman allows him to express all kinds of truths that no one else dares express, especially the psychological toll of being locked inside one's home during curfews. His role is compounded by the perspective of his seven-year-old sister Nargis, who also serves as a viewpoint through which basic or innocent questions can be asked without fear. For instance, Nargis is injured by a bird, a kite:

> Once an angry kite injured my finger. So much blood came out. Is Suraiya a kite as well? She made brother crazy. Grandmother says she's hellish—who knows how many homes she will destroy! (28)

Nargis makes childish links between events and quotes adults without fully understanding them, but thereby exposing the way society functions and the way adults ignore or justify what is unacceptable. She keeps on seeing vultures

circling in the sky, and these vultures serve as a warning of things to come, not just for Rehan, but perhaps for his society as well (112, 114,121).

Rehan's preoccupation with the riots happening around him raises questions about the source of his madness. Is it just due to his broken heart? Or is it a mixture of politics and failed love? Or perhaps the fact that his lover is moving to Pakistan creates a conflation of the two to such an extent that they become one? He thinks that if he had a job he might be able to marry Suraiya (114). But then he remembers Narayanji's dismissal of Muslims, of whom he says: "[they] live in Hindustan but see Pakistan in their dreams" (114). Foreshadowing his own death, albeit by Muslims rather than Hindus, Rehan rants on about his personal tensions:

> "Kill the murderers, kill my murderer. They're not real men. No one comes out. This is my country, my country (*vatan*). Let's see who can stop me from living? If anyone is brave enough, let them come. I'll smash their skulls one by one." Saying this he started throwing tiles down from the roof. Thankfully there was a two-hour break in the curfew. (114)

These tensions arise from his being a Muslim, but they affect him in different ways. They affect his basic sense of belonging, his right to a place like any other person.

The title of the story, "This Side of the Border," hints at the bifurcation of the subcontinent, which in turn has led to the hardening of divisions of space within cities and neighbourhoods as either Hindu or Muslim. The specter of Pakistan looms large in many of the novels and short stories I have discussed so far, but the following quote expresses the most extreme positioning of Pakistan as a reference point for Indian Muslims:

> "Kill all the Hindus, strangle them! Sons of bitches, they say I'm Pakistani. Go and ask them, where are your forefathers? Mine are buried in this very earth. If you want proof, then go and look at our graveyards

> […] looking for a good excuse not to give us a job! Isn't that it, after all?" (112)

Yet Rehan's angry response at being called a Pakistani is surprising. Instead of turning on the Hindus, whom he has just been threating to kill, he vents his anger on the poet Iqbal, who is considered by many to be the father of the idea of Pakistan. This link to Iqbal and Pakistan is couched in an episode rich with symbolism: Rehan is seen burning something in an alley. A passer-by asks him what he is burning, and it turns out he is making a pyre of ideas and pride (118). The man laughs and asks him whose ideas he is burning, and Rehan says "Iqbal's! The great poet who had the dream of creating Pakistan" (118). It turns out that Rehan has asked all his neighbours for their copies of Iqbal's books and is now busy burning them in the alley. He says:

> "A poet who cuts people's' hearts, who breaks up human relations, should be respected by coal since by touching coal the hand becomes black and the mind dark. Do you understand, Parvez?" (118)

After burning Iqbal's poems, Rehan collects the ashes and sends them as a wedding gift to Suraiya. It seems that, through this symbolic action, Rehan has finally found peace again. He sleeps well and stops acting like a madman: "At home everyone thanked God that these dangerous days had passed in peace" (120).

This adds to the ambiguity of Rehan's craziness. Did the burning of Iqbal's works allow him to find peace of mind? Is he getting better? These questions remain open until he is murdered. The whole neighbourhood shows up for his funeral, and the fact that Rehan was beloved by all is expressed in the sadness of his Hindu neighbours: "Saraswati and Ramkhilavan couldn't stop their tears" (120). Of course Rehan is murdered by Muslims rather than Hindus,

and Hindus are represented as mourning him; the neat divisions that communal violence seeks to make are undermined.

Both "*Maiṁ hindū hūṁ*" and "*Sarhad ke is pār*" take place during the heightened tension of communal riots and present Muslims as both victims and villains. In "*Maiṁ hindū hūṁ*" the neighbourhood boys drive Saifu over the edge, while in "*Sarhad ke is pār*" three Muslim youths murder Rehan. This representation of intra-community violence during or around inter-communal riots breaks free from the Hindu–Muslim binary and allows the reader to identify with the victims without the need to take sides. The reader's instinctual identification with one side or the other is neutralized and the story resonates, bypassing the reader's prejudices. What remains is the terrible price of violence and the way the perpetrators of violence use community as a pretext.

Much work has been done on violence in the Indian context and its prevalence as a "language" of communal relations. This violence has been linked to many different sources, such as partition and ethnic politics.[74] One way to understand *"Maiṁ hindū hūṁ"* and *"Śāh ālam camp kī rūheṁ"*, the two stories that Wajahat published in 2002 in the aftermath of the pogroms in Gujarat, is that they are his contribution to the upsurge of interest in the sources and effects of communal violence.

7 Conclusion

The sharp division between the way Wajahat's novels and short stories deal with Muslim identity and minority issues raises important questions about

[74] For a discussion of the role of violence in the consolidation of Hindutva in Gujarat, see Shani. Further, see Veena Das's famous work on violence for a discussion of its psychological effects and the lasting trauma of Partition. Also, see Varshney's work (2003), which argues for specific local interpretations of violence: "the argument of this book shifts our attention from political institutions and elites to the structure of civil life" (13). While his argument is problematic in its refusal to link larger political trends with violence, it is also useful in reminding us to look for local variants and causes.

genre and the different functions that the novels and short story (or vignette) fulfill. Wajahat's short stories focus on specific moments or "fragments" of life, while his novels, which are largely autobiographical, read like summaries of events. Both the short stories and the novels touch upon issues of Muslim marginalization in India. Wajahat's novels note the decline of the old order and the old landed class. However, there is no nostalgia, and the decline is described in very matter-of-fact terms. Wajahat does not touch upon specific questions of Muslim identity in post-partition India. The fact that his characters undergo very little change throughout his novels reinforces the sense that the political atmosphere and social developments have a limited effect on them.

Wajahat's short stories, on the other hand, do portray a preoccupation with the violence and the threat of violence that Muslim communities and individuals, particularly in non-affluent neighbourhoods, are subjected to. However, the violence never happens to the narrator, and the psychological effects are always described from an external point of view. I argue that this has to do with an intersectional point of view. Wajahat and his narrators are always removed from the front line because of their privileges and those who suffer from communal violence are always disadvantaged in more than one way. That is, they are *both* Muslim and poor, or *both* Muslim and disenfranchised, etc. For Wajahat, Muslim identity alone does not create tension. Muslim identity's potential to "other" its subjects depends on other marginalizing identities intersecting with it.

Deleuze and Guattari's definition of Minor Literature provided them with a key through which to interpret the many layers of Kafka's stories and the discomfort that they cause their readers. Wajahat's texts do not evoke the same kind of discomfort and sense of urgency, leading us to question Aamir Mufti's formulation about the crisis of Muslim culture in post-partition India. His autobiographical novels point towards two different options. The first is that, notwithstanding the process of minoritization and the pressures created along

with it, there are ways of existence, or pockets of resistance, in which this form of politics or identity politics is far from dominant and is merely one factor among many. The second option is that Wajahat's Shia identity and surroundings inculcated a sense of minority existence that remains unmoved by the general minoritization of Muslim identity in India. In other words, especially when dealing with national issues, Shia identity is less susceptible to accusations of allegiance to Pakistan than (Sunni) Muslim identity.

Finally, in the short-story section, this chapter has brought together short stories by Wajahat and Sharma in order to highlight their use of madness and mad characters, which allows the authors to bring to the surface the tensions in Muslim–Hindu relations that are often rendered invisible or normalized. Moreover, both authors use the liminal characters' behaviour to expose social ills rather than individual malaise.

Unlike Wajahat's novels, Nasira Sharma's *Pārijāt* (2011), the novel discussed in the next chapter, has a clear agenda. *Pārijāt* focuses on the relationship between Hindus and Muslims and argues for a revival of the Ganga-Jamuni culture through the characters of Hussaini Brahmins, who exemplify the possibility of a more inclusive identity that is rooted in one's cultural tradition.

Chapter Four: Nasira Sharma's *Pārijāt:* The Formula for Communal Harmony and Recovery of Lost Selves

> It is literature that produces an active solidarity in spite of scepticism; and if the writer is in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the more the possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility.
>
> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (*Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, 17).

1 Introduction

Nasira Sharma's *Pārijāt* (2011), which is also the name of a magical tree in Sanskrit mythology, received the Sahitya Akademi award in 2016 for the best work in Hindi.[75] Unlike the other novels analysed in the previous chapters, *Pārijāt* presents a clear ideological stance, and Sharma creates a protagonist, Rohan, whose identity and personal history offer both a roadmap for communal harmony and a warning of the malign influences of the West and its version of modernity. This chapter shows how the introduction of the real, though fairly obscure community of Hussaini Brahmins, which blends Islamic and Hindu beliefs and practices, is used to educate the novel's readers about the composite Ganga-Jamuni culture. Most of the novel is set in the Doab region, especially Allahabad and Lucknow, the geographical homeland of this composite culture. Whereas all the other novels examined in this thesis accept the division between Hindus and Muslims as a given, *Pārijāt* challenges these clear-cut boundaries through its account of Rohan and the Hussaini Brahmin community. This approach seeks to position Western culture and modernity, rather than the majoritarianism of national-state culture, as the problem and to

[75] The Sahitya Akademi is India's academy of literature and awards prizes in different Indian languages every year. For more details, see George, Rao.

highlight the common ground between communities rather than what separates them.

A central part of this joint Hindu–Muslim culture is the role of the battle of Karbala in creating a shared narrative that can serve as a guide for negotiating postcolonial reality. I argue that, rather than focusing on psyche of an individual or the ambiguous inner emotional world of characters, the characters in *Pārijāt*, including the protagonist Rohan, are important for the role they play within the broader message of the novel. While *Pārijāt* is written in a realist mode, it also tries to represent the world as it should be according to the narrator, turning the novel into a manifesto for communal harmony, an approach I examine through Suzanne Suleiman's theory of the ideological novel, the *roman à thèse.*

Pārijāt is a behemoth of a novel, running to over five hundred pages of intertwined narratives. It is rich in detail and characters and mixes numerous styles and narrative techniques, ranging from poetry, letters, journal entries, dreams, descriptions of religious gatherings and retellings of the story of the Battle of Karbala. The novel consists of many retellings of past events that explain the characters' motivations and personal histories, and narrative tension is largely maintained by the slow pace and the gradual revelation of past events. Relatively late in the novel we learn that Parijat is also the name of the main protagonist's son (375). The novel's title, *Pārijāt*—also known as *Kalpataru* or wish-giving tree in Sanskrit mythology—hints at its utopian and didactic turn, since by evoking a Hindu symbol, Sharma, a Muslim writer, implicitly invokes a joint cultural heritage.

As I have already mentioned in the Introduction, this was the first time that a novel written by an author from a Muslim background had won the Sahitya Akademi prize for Hindi, and Nasira Sharma was only the fourth woman recipient of the prize since its founding in 1955. Sharma was born in Allahabad in 1948 to a Shia family. Her father was a renowned Urdu scholar at

Allahabad University, and there have been many authors and poets in her family.[76] Sharma completed an MA in Persian, then married a Hindu, with whom she lived in the UK for a few years. She has published numerous books, including at least ten short-story collections, six novels, collected reportage from Iran and Afghanistan, and translated short stories from Persian. Much of her work has been produced for film and television. Throughout her career she has been interested in Hindu–Muslim relations, and her latest non-fiction book, *Rāṣṭra aur musalmān* (*The Government and Muslims,* 2016), is a collection of her newspaper columns, including a later essay reviewing the position of Muslims in India.

After providing a brief outline of the structure of the novel, I turn to Suleiman's theory about the *roman à thèse,* arguing that (a) *Pārijāt* places religion, specifically the story of the battle of Karbala, as a solution to the post-colonial predicament of Muslims in India. (b) This novel also stands out from the others discussed in the thesis in its didactic impulse and promotion of the composite Ganga-Jamuni culture. I then show (c) that the narrative's repetitive structure facilitates the presentation of Sharma's message through numerous retellings of the same episodes and various characters who occupy redundant positions in the plot. Finally (d), I discuss Rohan's recovery of identity through his engagement with the story of the Battle of Karbala and the Hussaini Brahman community.

These elements together produce a unique kind of Minor Literature. Sharma creates a narrative that is designed to remind Hindus and Muslims of their shared culture rather than highlighting differences and lodging protests. In other words, Sharma, like the other authors in this thesis, also focuses on the

[76] Nasira Sharma has given numerous television interviews posted on YouTube. The three most relevant ones are Tejasvini: Interaction with Nasira Sharma (uploaded by DD News), Shakhsiyat with Nasera Sharma (uploaded by Rajya Sabha TV), and Sharma Nasira (uploaded by Savita Nagar) (accessed 21/6/2018).

position of Muslims in India. However, rather than accepting the paradigm of minoritization and marginalization, she creates, or re-creates, an alternative Hindu–Muslim relationship based on shared histories and religious practices.

2 Roman à thèse

In *Authoritarian Fictions: The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre* (1983), Susan Suleiman helps us find a way to discuss "novels with a clear ideological message," which she calls, following others, *romans à thèse* (1). This kind of novel presents "a recognized body of doctrine or system of ideas" (1). In Suleiman's definition, which contains no value judgement:

> A *roman à thèse* is a novel written in the realistic mode (that is, based on an aesthetic of verisimilitude and representation), which signals itself to the reader as primarily didactic in intent, seeking to demonstrate the validity of a political, philosophical, or religious doctrine. (7)

This definition foregrounds three crucial elements. The first is realism: defining the *roman à thèse* as a type of realist novel helps distinguish it from novels which are also didactic and persuasive but have non-realist narratives, such as utopias. Secondly, the *roman à thèse* is primarily didactic in that it seeks to demonstrate the validity of a particular doctrine, which is the third element. Compared to other didactic novels, one of the identifiable traits of a *roman à thèse* is that the doctrine or system of ideas should be formulated in an insistent, consistent and unambiguous manner. Suleiman calls the *roman à thèse* an "authoritarian genre" because it appeals to the need for certainty, stability and unity, as well as affirming absolute truths and absolute values. Suleiman proposes three further criteria: "the presence of an unambiguous, dualistic system of values, the presence (even if it is only implied, not stated) of a rule of action addressed to the reader, and the presence of a doctrinal intertext" (56). The need to provide

clear examples produces a polarised system of positive and negative values and characters, whose fate is explained in light of the doctrine, which is present, implicitly or explicitly, as an intertext. Their example and fate urge the reader to act in a certain way for her own good.

Suleiman posits two main narrative structures for the *roman à thèse*: one she calls the "structure of apprenticeship," the other the "structure of confrontation." In the structure of apprenticeship, positive characters or "apprentices" gradually acquire knowledge or enlightenment thanks to a helper or guide by overcoming a series of "trials"; by contrast, negative characters cannot attain the truth due to their failure to overcome the obstacles. In the "structure of confrontation", a collective hero sets out to fight for one or more specific values, such as truth, justice or freedom, through physical, legal or any other means against well-defined opponents. Whether the hero wins or fails, the goodness of his cause is not in doubt.

Suleiman's work is a good starting point for discussing Sharma's *Pārijāt* since its ideological agenda structures the novel's plot, narrative and character system. "The story told by the *roman à thèse* is essentially teleological—it is determined by a specific end, which exists 'before' and 'above' the story", Suleiman argues (54). In *Pārijāt* this end is to show the power of reconnecting to the Ganga-Jamuni culture and the need to return to Indian traditions eschewing western influence. *Pārijāt* was written in the context of the rise in Hindutva, and Suleiman helps us understand how the political climate influences the form of the novel:

> One may suppose, for example, that the *roman à thèse* flourishes in national contexts, and at historical moments, that produce sharp social and ideological conflicts—in other words, in a climate of crisis. (16)

The novel's didactic intent offers a way to solve or transcend these "sharp social and ideological conflicts" by shifting the debate from one of Hindus versus

Muslims to their joint struggle as Indians in the face of westernization and soulless modernity.

Suleiman's conception of the *roman à thèse* emphasizes the idea of repetition and redundancy (171). Suleiman argues that redundancy is an integral element of the *roman à thèse*, since, in order to drive it home, the message is repeated time and time again. Redundancy is a clear feature of *Pārijāt* on two levels: first, the multiple description of the battle of Karbala, including the many *marsiyas* quoted, and secondly, the array of minor characters who mirror each other, such as Safir and Riaz.[77] These minor characters serve to emphasize some of the protagonists' central problems, and I will focus on them in greater detail later in the chapter. The minor characters' side stories often follow similar trajectories to the main narrative, allowing for both a repetition and an exploration of minor variations. For example, Rohan's friend Salim consults him regarding his desire to marry his German girlfriend, and Rohan feels that he has saved him from a big mistake when the wedding is called off (86, 127).

Yet another sign of *Pārijāt's* ideological stance is that there are no negative Indian characters in the novel. The Manichean perspective of a *roman à thèse* helps us see that Sharma has neatly divided her characters into Indian and non-Indian rather than Muslim and Hindu. In order for the novel's ideological message to work, Sharma allows very little space for ambiguity regarding who is right or wrong. Even when Rohan travels to the West, he primarily meets Indians, and thus the only Westerners in the book are his first wife Alison, her mother and Alison's new partner Lara, all of whom are represented in a negative light and criticized from a perspective rooted in traditional Indian ideas of relationships and family structure. Sharma constructs a scathing

[77] A *marsiya* is an elegiac poem written to commemorate and mourn the events of the battle of Karbala; see Naim.

critique by having both Alison and her mother cold-heartedly moving from one relationship to the next without compunction. Alison hates her mother for re-marrying a mere two months after her father's suicide. The breakdown of family values is emphasized in that not only was Alison's mother married four times (383), but Alison herself was involved in so many unsuccessful "love relationships" that, in something of an ironic twist, her mother threatens to exclude Allison from her will (383). Alison also plays an important role as a contrast to Rohan's friend and eventual partner Ruhi, whose name literally means "spiritual" and who nurtures Rohan and provides a space for him to rediscover himself and regain his footing after the divorce.

We may read the stark portrayal of these negative characters as an attempt to shift India's internal tensions outside Indian society in an effort to create a unified Indian front against the West, thus sidelining internal Hindu–Muslim tensions. Even anti-Muslim feeling seems to be relocated or transferred to the West. When Alison hears that Rohan has some Muslim heritage, "the blood drains from her face", ostensibly exposing the strength of this Western woman's prejudice (383).

The relationships among the characters are presented in such a way that there is always a mixture of clearly Muslim and Hindu names—such as Rohan-Ruhi, Prabha and Firdos Jahan (Rohan and Ruhi's mothers), Safir (Rohan's guide) and Prahlad (Rohan's father). Instead of the tensions between Hindu and Muslim friends that we saw dominate Manzoor Ahtesham's novels, or the tensions between different Muslim social classes and their vulnerability to violence that we saw in Asghar Wajahat, here the problem is with the West, not between different groups in India. On the contrary, there is a celebration of a joint culture, with Sharma taking pains to show that the Hindu and Muslim characters celebrate each other's festivals and participate within a single cultural space or, if one will, national narrative. All these relationships between Muslims and Hindus and their joint celebrations are presented as part of a

continuum that can be traced back at least to the Battle of Karbala. Sharma takes care to portray characters with Muslim and Hindu names showing respect to and affiliation with celebrations such as Holi and Muharram without linking them to one exclusive religion, instead treating them as Indian and as all-inclusive.

3 The Protagonist as Representative

Pārijāt starts with a crisis. Rohan Dutt, the main protagonist, is introduced to the reader after his return to India from abroad. The action is set in contemporary times—we know this because a party he attends immediately after his return is interrupted by news of the terror attacks in Mumbai in 2008 (13-14). We learn that Rohan is experiencing a crisis, but its origins are not yet clear. Only later do we learn that he is recently divorced and that his former wife has disappeared with their son. His personal crisis is coupled with the crisis of the recent terror attacks. This crisis is not limited to India, for we learn that Rohan's father Prahlad, an academic, is going to the US for an international conference about terrorism (30).

The novel is structured in such a way as to gradually expose Rohan's downfall while describing his parallel process of recovery through the rediscovery of his roots. The process of Rohan's remembering is both personal and representative of the collective consciousness of his community or even nation. Rohan discovers that he belongs to the Hussaini Brahman community, a community that blends Hinduism and Islam. This directs the focus of the novel to the story of the Battle of Karbala (I will discuss the Hussaini Brahman community at length later in this chapter). Recovering his cultural background is what allows Rohan to process the very personal trauma of losing his own son. I argue that Rohan's personal story is also about the crisis in India between Muslims and Hindus. The solution for Rohan is also the solution for the nation,

namely a return to a joint culture in which differences are not erased, but nor are they the source of animosity, nor are they a reason for seeking the greener pastures of the West, which anyway turn out to be illusory.

Rohan's process of recuperation begins when he recognizes that he has changed and tells Ruhi, "I am a defeated person" (56). Ruhi is a childhood friend whom he will eventually marry at the end of the novel. Rohan has returned to India from Saudi Arabia after divorcing his British wife Alison. Alison kidnapped their son, Parijat, when he was about two years old and has since disappeared without a trace. As the novel progresses we learn that not only did she abscond with their child, she also orchestrated Rohan's arrest on false charges and thoroughly ruined his life by spreading malicious rumours about him, ultimately bankrupting him in the process (57, 73). Later we learn that Alison is now in a relationship with another *woman*, and towards the end of the novel, to add insult to injury and to drive home the message of incompatibility, we learn that Alison is eight years older than Rohan (314, 440, 501)! Sharma emphasizes, in every way possible, that the morals and culture of the West are inconsistent with and inferior to India's. The storyline follows Rohan's attempts to rebuild his life and his growing interest in his own background after years of living a deracinated life outside India. Rohan is an only child, and his troubles deeply affect his parents. His mother died during his divorce proceedings, while his father was forced to postpone his retirement from his university position since the family savings were spent on Rohan's trial.

Rohan's journey to regain control of his life is connected to the discovery of his origins. We learn in the middle of the novel that Rohan actually converted to Islam while in jail in Saudi Arabia. He converted for pragmatic reasons for the sake of his child, hoping that being a Muslim his divorce case would be debated in a Sharia court where he would have a chance to gain custody of his son. The omniscient narrator asks: "What was the truth? Did he

actually change his religion, or was it simply to deceive others?" (207). This question remains open throughout. By keeping Rohan's religious affiliation unclear, he remains a symbol of the joint Hindu-Muslim tradition which does not lend itself to a clear "either /or" categorization. Later in the novel, in an aside, we learn that Rohan takes pride in the notion that one of his mother's ancestors was a Sayyed: "That relation means that we also have some Muslim blood" (383).

Rohan's characterisation is significant since he is the central protagonist in the novel. His trauma and recovery follow an arc that makes him less of a rounded character and more of a vessel used to convey a certain ideological view. The readers are privy to Rohan's inner life and struggles, but there is still a sense that Rohan has been selected as the protagonist because of his Hussaini Brahman identity and the solace he finds in rediscovering his roots. In other words, Rohan's characterization does not include any detail that is superfluous to the message of the novel; his every interaction, including those with his most intimate circle, is connected to his journey of rediscovery and recovery. It is not the case that Rohan's character is influenced or shaped by his communal identity. Rather, Sharma uses Rohan to make a bigger point about the dangers of the West and modernity and of forgetting one's heritage. In addition, she shows that the formula for dealing with the problems and challenges of the modern world is to go back to one's own culture and its foundational narratives. Rohan is not a cardboard figure, but at the same time he is not a fully fleshed-out character with contradictions and ambiguities. Rather, he is the focal point through which the readers are inculcated into Sharma's beliefs and ideology.

4 Rohan's Journey

Rohan's journey of self-discovery starts by chance. Back in India, he uses the opportunity to go to a *majlis*, a mourning ceremony in which poetry is recited,

and say hello to an old family friend.[78] He plans to pay his respects and quickly leave, but is forced to stay since he cannot find the man he was looking for. He spends the entire time in the *majlis* hearing the *marsiya*s being recited but not really listening to them while planning his escape from the event. Yet involuntarily some lines enter his head, and he starts thinking in parallel to them:

> So was Bush from the Sa'ad family? Scenes of flowing blood and marching boots flooded his senses. It was as if the Iraq–Iran war, the attack on the Trade Towers and the falling cluster bombs on Afghanistan were tearing his ears. [...] Arab society is silent, and here people are weeping at something that happened fourteen hundred years ago? Is this a show, or something else? (78)

Rohan is sceptical about the whole event and about the extravagant display of emotions. He is just about to leave when a couplet in a poem describing the suffering of the babies who were denied water catches his attention: "Rohan froze when he heard the line. Tesu's innocent face appeared before him" (79).[79] As the *marsiya* continues, Rohan is flooded with memories and emotions until he faints. His recollections of moments of the divorce trial are interspersed with stanzas from the *marsiya*:

> Suddenly the tension in Rohan's body started melting like snow. The tears he had been holding back with such an effort for such a long time started flowing. No Yazid could guard them. (81)

[78] A *majlis* is a gathering in which poetry commemorating the battle of Karbala is recited; see Bailey.

[79] Rohan's son is named Parijat but is called Tesu by Rohan and his family.

The *marsiya* recitation serves as a catharsis for Rohan as he confronts the tragedy of losing his son, and this moment marks the beginning of his journey of self-discovery.

After reviving Rohan with some water following his emotional response to the *marsiyas* in his first *majlis*, a stranger takes it upon himself to explain what is happening. This interaction is best understood through the model of the *roman à thèse*, with the stranger acting as Rohan's "helper", the "apprentice." One of Suleiman's claims is that the protagonist of the *roman à thèse* must undergo a "trial of interpretation, where the candidate is placed before a situation—or a text—that he must understand and explain" (78). After coming back to his senses Rohan undergoes "a trial of interpretation," which is when the novel's "didactic intent" comes to the fore (7). Unlike the protagonist of a *Bildungsroman,* for example, Rohan does not need to undergo a trial of action but only needs to understand. This process of understanding is the medium through which the ideological message of the novel is transferred to the readers. The stranger informs Rohan that it is important to know the details in order to understand the story: "Take the Mahabharata—you must know the characters of the Ramayana and Mahabharata. You have to know their merits and faults to understand the story" (97). After a long and detailed explanation of the Battle of Karbala (the first of many in the book), the man recites a few stanzas of a *marsiya*. A few moments of pregnant silence ensue, and then he says: "This is the *marsiya*, it is not connected to religion but to human emotions" (103). This last explanation reassures Rohan, and perhaps the readers as well, by shifting the focus from a religious to a shared spiritual, emotional discourse.

By representing Rohan rediscovering the details of the Battle of Karbala, Sharma devotes space to the story and its significance for Shias. Paralleling his fictional learning process, Rohan becomes the student through which the readers are educated. Rohan's role as both the protagonist and the vessel through which the readers learn about Karbala is exemplified at the beginning

of his first lesson about the battle when he says: "Uncle, treat me as a beginner student. I know some pieces here and there and I'm familiar with the names, but I still don't know the basic things" (98). Suleiman describes the structure of this relationship as an "apprenticeship" in which the student becomes a "vehicle" for the didactic message (63-83) and the reader shares with Rohan the process of transformation.

As the narrative continues, it draws a connection between *marsiya* recitation and Hindu devotional poetry. After hearing the story of Karbala, Rohan walks home "during the hour of the *arati*. The sweet voice coming out of a mother's mouth melted in his ears. His feet lead him towards the temple" (106). Rohan is attracted to the temple and the chants wafting out of it:

> *Jasodā maiyā tero lalnā*
> *Sone kā loṭā, gangā-jal pānī*
> *Na pīvai na pīvan dai*
> *Jasodā maiyā tero lalnā*
>
> Mother Yashoda your child
> A Golden container of Ganges water
> Doesn't drink and doesn't let drink
> Mother Yashoda your child (106)

Rohan is described as being moved and, just as in the case of the Battle of Karbala, it is the description of children, in this case Krishna, which touches him. His liminality suggests his capacity to be attracted to or to belong to two worlds that are perceived in popular discourse as opposing and incompatible. Through the character of Rohan, Sharma creates an equivalence between two different religious practices without naming them, or delimiting them, as Islam and Hinduism. That is, Rohan's ability to be touched and to feel similar devotional emotions from two different traditions serves as a model for the reader. This point is crucial for understanding Sharma's approach towards minority or Muslim identity. For her the difference is in nomenclature: the

religious or spiritual impulses themselves are shared, and this is the key in the fight against ideologies that seek to separate and draw clear boundaries. By showing the capaciousness of an identity that is not limited by narrow definitions, Sharma charts a course for a religious identity based on both Hindu and Islamic traditions.

The novel goes to great lengths to show that these religious practices are not new but have merely been forgotten or neglected. In the course of his readings about Karbala, Rohan comes across photos of himself as child participating in a Muharram procession with his family (89). Again and again there are repeated indications that the commemoration of Karbala has only recently been discarded or set aside. Rohan and his generation are implicitly criticized for their desire for clear-cut categories that disrespect the past and its complexities. This criticism, of course, is also aimed at the current Zeitgeist, which discourages practices that challenge the drawing of clear boundaries. A further cause of the loss of tradition is the attraction of the West for Rohan's generation. The very community to which Rohan belongs, the Hussaini Brahmans, are a further example of non-existent or disruptive boundaries.

5 Retelling as Retrieval

The core of *Pārijāt*'s structure is a parallel recounting of past events. On one level we have Rohan's recent divorce, on another level the Battle of Karbala. The story of Karbala is represented in many different forms, but mainly through *marsiyas* that recount it and are extensively quoted in the text itself.[80]

The Battle of Karbala is a foundational narrative for Shias. The story recounts the seventh-century battle between Hussain, the Prophet's grandson, and Yazid, who had inherited the caliphate from his father Muawiyah. Hussain

[80] The *marsiyas* are quoted extensively in the following pages: 76-81, 102-107, 122, 233-237.

refused to pay tribute to Yazid, and this led to the slaughter of Hussain and his followers in the vicinity of the city of Karbala, located in present-day Iraq. As will be discussed later, for Shias, the death of Hussain and his followers has become a symbol of sacrifice and for standing by one's beliefs in the face of tyranny. *Pārijāt* suggests a parallel between Rohan's gradual stitching together of his own story in order to create a coherent narrative of his downfall with the multiple recountings of Karbala. Reading the story of Karbala helps Rohan understand what has happened to him: "In the midst of reading Rohan stopped... Lara, Lara must have played the same role for Alison that Ibne Ziyad did" (94). Rohan's untangling of his own trauma is linked to his learning about the battle. He identifies a famous villain from Karbala, Ibne Ziyad, with a villain in his own life, Lara, creating a link that transcends time and that connects him to the historical narrative.[81] For Rohan, there is a clear parallel between Alison's and Yazid's evil actions, specifically their heartless behaviour towards innocent children.

On a deeper level the novel shows how Karbala and *marsiya*s or poetical commemorations of the past are indispensable for a stable and grounded present. This is the basic structure of *Pārijāt*: rather than a forward moving narrative, it retells the past and works through it in order to create a viable present. A further element that is crucial for the novel is the emotional release afforded by retelling the story of the Battle of Karbala, which is traditionally told with dramatic emotional outpourings. The structure of the retelling of Karbala in *Pārijāt* links it to contemporary India and modern issues. I will deal with this in detail later in the chapter. Before that it is important to discuss the structure of *Pārijāt*.

[81] Ibne Ziyad was the commander of the army that carried out the killing of Hussain and his retinue in Karbala on the orders of the Caliph Yazid.

Genette, in his work on the structure of narratives, borrows the terms *fabula* and *syuzhet* from Russian formalism. The *fabula* is the story set in linear chronological order, while the *syuzhet* is the order in which it is told. The initial response is to assume that the *syuzhet* is constructed out of the *fabula,* but Jonathan Culler and others have shown that the reader constructs the *fabula* through the *syuzhet* rather than the other way round.[82] In other words, in a novel the reader has to imagine or construct the *fabula* to "make sense" of the story. This element is crucial for *Pārijāt,* since Rohan is continually going back to the story of his divorce and remembering different details—as if the trauma is so big it can only be dealt with in snippets. In other words, Sharma creates a parallel between generating a personal narrative, a *fabula* out of his own *syuzjet,* and "making sense" of events, with a communal story repeatedly retold as in the case of the Battle of Karbala. *Pārijāt* is structured in such a way that the reader rereads the familiar history of the battle of Karbala and Ganga-Jamuni culture through a *syuzhet* which invites a renewed interpretation of the *fabula*. The *fabula*, or the history of Muslim–Hindu relations, has been radically influenced by the rise of nationalism, and *Pārijāt* rewrites this by describing Rohan's retrieval of his lost self.

6 Hussaini Brahmans

The description of the Hussaini Brahman community serves as a living representation of how to belong to more than one tradition at a time or to a composite tradition. The reader is introduced to Hussaini Brahmans together with Rohan as part of Rohan's (re)education. That is, in the beginning Hussaini Brahmans are mentioned only in passing (83), and they are only introduced in depth when Rohan becomes curious about them (84-102). Following the

[82] See Culler.

convention of the *roman à thèse*, there is much repetition and redundancy in the discussion surrounding this community, and the Hussaini Brahmans are introduced and discussed by different characters at different points throughout the novel (159, 189, 229, 366-377).

Hussaini Brahmans, or Mohyals, are a community living in South Asia that traces its origins to the battle of Karbala.[83] They are mentioned from time to time in works of fiction, but *Pārijāt* is the only novel I have managed to find with a Hussaini Brahman protagonist. The Hussaini Brahman's founding story is that Imam Hussain, the Prophet's grandson, had blessed a Brahman named Rahib Dutt with sons. When Dutt heard about the events in Karbala he rushed there with his sons (depending on the source, either from nearby or all the way from India). Although they arrived only after the battle had finished, his seven sons nonetheless died fighting Yazid's army during its return from the battlefield. Hussaini Brahmans maintain their Hindu faith but also celebrate Muharram and participate in other commemorations of the Battle of Karbala.

During Rohan's extensive reading and discussions about Hussaini Brahmans he comes across a saying that they are "not Hindu, not Muslim" (377).[84] In the novel their non-orthodox identity is never challenged by either Muslims or Hindus, creating the sense that they belong to both communities. Furthermore, no character in the novel seems prejudiced against any community. As part of the ideal world presented in this *roman à thèse*, communal tensions exist on the sidelines and do not take up mental space. The following passage is perhaps the only moment in the novel in which the

[83] Following the usage in *Pārijāt* and in other non-fiction works, I will use the names Hussaini Brahman and Mohyal interchangeably. As far as I can tell, there has been no systematic academic research done on them. However there are numerous mentions online, e.g. Hussaini Brahmin-timesofindia, Hussaini Brahmin-tumblr, Hussaini Brahmin-wikipedia (all accessed 7/3/2018).

[84] For more on liminal identities and marginal communities, see Freitag, Gottschalk, Mayaram (1997, 2003), Sila-Khan.

Hussaini Brahman liminal identity causes tension. During a drinking session with a few men from the Hussaini Brahman community, tensions run high and a prominent Hussaini Brahman businessman says: "Listen to what I have to say, in the coming times our *identity crisis* will only get worse. Eventually we won't belong neither here nor there" (159; "identity crisis" is said in English). This man is lamenting the hardening boundaries between religions and the growing difficulty of maintaining identities that do not conform to recognizable paradigms. These things rile some of the others, and one says, "You shut up!" with genuine anger (159). The argument leads one of the men to observe that "the real sign of a Hussaini Brahman is that they can't stand another Hussaini Brahman" (159).

All the texts discussed in this thesis show that self-loathing is a common response among marginalized communities, since individuals internalise the dominant discourse and definitions, not knowing where to locate themselves on the increasingly fraught identity map. Not fitting in is seen as a personal problem rather than once caused by external forces. The individual reaction to marginalization, or not fitting in, is usually understood on the individual level as a personal problem rather than as an expression of larger political forces. Rohan himself does not seem to have any difficulty about being a Hussaini Brahman or any awareness that this is an unsustainable identity. Moreover, throughout the novel there are no instances where a Muslim or a Hindu queries or challenges Hussaini Brahman identity. Within the represented world of the novel the community seems to exist in peace with its surroundings and, apart from the above quoted discussion, it exhibits no sign of the pressures associated with minority groups.

In one of the many instances in the novel in which Rohan is overcome with grief for his separation from his son, he has a dream in which he prays to God in a mosque. "O God (*e ḵẖudā*) ... my God (*mere mābud*), how many more sacrifices (*kurbānī*) will you take from this man?" (225). Rohan sees the loss of

his son as paralleled in the martyrdom of Hussain. The use of Islamic terms raises many questions. Did Rohan's conversion to Islam during his divorce proceedings really carry weight after all? The question remains open, but Islam definitely plays a larger role in Rohan's devotional world after the divorce. His religious identity is a complicated one, but we never see him praying to Hindu gods, and the story of the Battle of Karbala has a therapeutic effect on him that no Hindu narrative seems to have. Soon after the divorce we learn that Rohan has grown a "thick beard" (228). This sounds like the type of beards that devout Muslims grow, but it could also be a sign of his state of mourning and self-neglect. Sharma keeps hinting at Rohan's religious state without explicitly placing him in a fixed position, allowing the Hussaini Brahman identity to accommodate whichever turn he makes. Despite the tensions implicit in occupying a liminal position, we see that this space also allows for a capaciousness that is not usually afforded in clearly defined identities.

Rohan ends his journey of self-discovery in an emphatic way. After hearing a couplet describing Rahib Dutt's sacrifice of his seven sons,

> Rohan's face beamed. He finally understood. In order to fully complete Ali's praise for his son Hussain, Rahib Dutt had sacrificed his seven sons. Suddenly Rohan struck the table with his fist and said "Rohan Dutt, bury your questions and accept this truth. You are a Hussaini Brahman, that's it." (432)

After this moment there are no more discussions of Hussaini Brahmans, and it seems that Rohan has arrived at a place he is comfortable in and has no need for further exploration or understanding. The story of Rahib Dutt's sacrifice of his son for a noble cause provides Rohan with the emotional support he needs to handle the loss of his son. Is Sharma suggesting that Rohan sacrificed his son? Does Rohan's loss of his son pave the way for his re-entering and re-adopting his community and identity? Or perhaps the communal mourning rites released

by the *marsiya*s are what allow him to overcome his loss? These remain open questions.

Rohan's "forgetting" of his origins and his need to rediscover them serve an important function in the novel in allowing him to set out on a journey of self-healing which is an allegory for modern India's search for self-identity. The cathartic powers of Muharram will be the focus of the next section. The fact that Rohan ends up marrying Ruhi, who is a Shia and whose name means "spirit", can be seen as bringing the journey of discovery to its successful conclusion, recreating the joint culture that has been forgotten or written off as dead. Ruhi serves as a stable presence in the novel, always happy to welcome Rohan, not judging him for his previous mistakes and providing him with the support he needs, serving as much as a mother as a romantic partner. Rohan's journey describes how India has become enamoured with the West and has forgotten its own roots. The only way forward in terms of this parallel is to return to tradition and eschew the temptations of the West. This journey is the central part of *Pārijāt* and will be the focus of the next section, along with the figure of Safir who functions as Rohan's guide.

7 Karbala and Destabilising Communal Boundaries

As mentioned above, Rohan has to re-discover his past and be re-educated since as a child he was uninterested in his immediate surroundings:

> Whatever re-enactment of Hussein's martyrdom they saw, it never had an effect on Rohan, Kazim, Monis and Ruhi. From childhood they were more attracted to the English language and to Europe. (33)

Compare the passage above with Rohan's reaction to hearing a *marsiya* recitation as an adult:

> Returning, Rohan was not like the old Rohan […] a strange magic had descended which changed everything […] one sentence kept reverberating in his mind instead of the call to prayer (*azān)*—this whole damn world is Karbala. (271)

The two passages above show the journey that Rohan has made in his relationship with the Battle of Karbala. In his book *Reliving Karbala: Martyrdom in South Asian Memory* (2006), Syed Akbar Hyder has shown the importance that Karbala has, and has had, for numerous communities in South Asia, both Muslim and non-Muslim. Hyder reminds us that Karbala serves a religious function in the widest sense of the term on both the community and individual levels, often being "invoked to mediate the personal sorrows of the devotees" (10). In South Asia, *tazya*s, the processions re-enacting and mourning the victims of the battle, have drawn participants from diverse religious backgrounds, and Karbala serves as a common paradigmatic story much like the Hindu epics. To quote from Mushirul Hasan's *From Pluralism to Separatism: Qasbas in Colonial Awadh* (2004), "[t]he Karbala paradigm itself communicated profound existential truths not only to Shias but also to Sunnis and Hindus" (37).

Pārijāt belongs to a tradition of Indian writing about Karbala that aims to foster communal harmony. Hyder argues that the vocabulary and imagery of Karbala permeated many different cultural productions in South Asia (136). Two of the greatest voices in Hindi and Urdu, Premchand and Manto, also wrote texts referring to Karbala.[85] Premchand wrote a play called *Karbalā* in the 1920s, which also mentioned the Hussaini Brahman community, in order to cement the bonds of Hindu-Muslim unity, which he felt were under attack from the rise of religious nationalism. Sharma's motivation is very much in line with

[85] See Sadat Hasan Manto "Yazid" (1951) and Ismat Chugtai *Ek ḳatrā ḳẖūn* (n.d.). Contemporary writers apart from Sharma have also used the trope of Karbala. See, for example, Azeem Amrohvi's poem "New Karbala", written after the 2002 pogroms in Gujarat (referred to in Hyder, 199).

Premchand's, although it comes almost a century later. However, unlike Premchand, Sharma does not present the battle directly; instead the readers learn about it along with, and through, the journey of self-realization of the main protagonist, Rohan.

Hyder shows how the discourse around Karbala complicates the divisions that are taken for granted by the other authors examined in the thesis:

> Thus a study of Karbala attenuates the ease with which we can speak of Shii, Sunni, Sufi, Hindu, religious, secular or diasporic—all of them implicated with the discourses of each, and existing in an unending bind of reciprocity. (207)

Pārijāt exhibits the "reciprocity" that Hyder talks about and leads us to think about the destabilizing effects of Karbala on the categories we use to discuss different groups. Dominique Sila-Khan's book *Crossing the Threshold: Understanding Religious Identities in South Asia* (2004) has shown that these identities were never as fixed as current nationalist or religious discourses tend to claim today. This is of course true of both Hinduism and Islam. Her work focuses on groups similar to the Hussaini Brahmans that blend Hindu and Muslim religious practices and beliefs. Sila-Khan argues that a neat separation between Hindus and Muslims is a recent phenomenon in India and that there continue to exist many traditions throughout North India that are not obviously one or the other:

> If we assume that religious groups are not defined once and for all, the idea of two compact and uniform blocks can only be a construct. The Hindus or the Muslims whom the question addresses are not real characters; they belong to an "imagined community" constructed in opposition to an entity perceived as the "indigenous Other". Such constructs, in turn, force us to address the question of identity versus alterity, and lead us to re-examine the broader issue of Self and Other—both at the individual level and collective levels. Ultimately this should

> help us move away from "the taken-for-granted, naturalised categories of 'Hindus and Muslims.'" (4)

By focusing on liminal communities, Sila-Khan shows that they occupy a spacious position that allows them to pick and choose different practices and that they are not limited by orthodox definitions of religion usually imposed by a centralized power. This is helpful in destabilizing our expectations and presumptions when it comes to discussing the Hussaini Brahman community.

All the other novels examined in this thesis accept the division between Hindu and Muslim at the "collective level" and seek to resist it on the "individual level". *Pārijāt* seeks to challenge both by presenting an individual character whose personal journey can be read along collective lines.

8 Minor Characters as Helpers

Rohan goes through two processes during his first *majlis* as an adult. As mentioned above, the *marsiya* provides an unexpected emotional release that leads to him fainting, and much to his surprise he learns that he somehow belongs, or has a family connection to *majlis* settings. This emotional release leads to the second significant process of the novel, in which Rohan devotes himself to learning about the Hussaini Brahman community and its history. Soon after the evening of his collapse, a few men who attended the *majlis* find Rohan and explain the role of the Mohyals in the battle of Karbala. Two of them, Uncle Sadiq and Safir, will become very close to Rohan and will serve as his guides in the world commemorating Karbala. After quoting a few couplets of a *marsiya*, Uncle Sadik tells Rohan:

> "Those were the days *miyan*, when *marsiya* became an art and took everyone beyond the borders of religion and any kind of community. Then, only human emotions held sway."

> "That's what I think uncle! I spent my childhood in these *majlises* listening to poetry."
> "You really need to start searching for your ancestors who fought alongside Hussain in Karbala." (114)

Rohan has childhood memories of attending *majlise*s but never really knew his connection to them, and consequently they remained unremarkable. Now that he has been so affected by the poetry and display of emotions, he is encouraged to set off on a journey of self-discovery. This journey will look for the common denominators of "human emotions" which are beyond the "borders of religion", thus allowing the readers themselves to examine their emotions without challenging their religious affiliations. Before describing Safir's role, it is important that we recognize how his function fits into the larger arrangement of *Pārijāt*.

As Alex Woloch argues, the space devoted to certain minor characters in a novel bears little relationship to their importance in the narrative as a whole. Like the nineteenth-century novels discussed by Woloch, *Pārijāt* too is full of minor characters whose function is the key to understanding the novel:

> In terms of their essential formal position (the subordinate beings who are delimited in themselves while performing a function for someone else), minor characters are the proletariat of the novel; and the realist novel—with its intense class-consciousness and attention toward social inequality—makes much of such formal processes. (Woloch, 27)

Safir and the many other characters in the novel that are named and described reveal the scope of the novel's ideological message. *Pārijāt* presents a world that strives for equality not just between elite members of different religions, but also across class and geographical boundaries. Perhaps the only characters exempt from this are the Westerners, who are portrayed as selfish and hollow, with no redeeming characteristics.

Safir, whose name in Urdu means "ambassador" and by extension "mediator", is the figure who guides Rohan in his process of learning about Hussaini Brahmans, the battle of Karbala and other religious traditions. The first time Safir appears in the narrative he is introduced as being very talented but unemployed—the perennial problem of Indian youth.

> "Safir miyan is here. We can encumber him with these matters. Mashallah he knows Urdu, English, Hindi, Farsi and Arabic very well," Uncle Sadik said, while opening the button of his Sherwani. Then with a faint smile he said, "Safir Miyan is very capable, but he is not successful." (108)

Safir's lack of succes is juxtaposed to Rohan, who has had a career abroad and has made lots of money. Rohan initially refuses Safir's offer of help since he does not want to waste Safir's time, but Uncle Sadik convinces him that there is no such thing as "wasting time" when it comes to studying. Safir appears in the narrative during pivotal moments in Rohan's life and introduces him to various religious settings to which he would otherwise have no access. Safir and the knowledge to which he introduces Rohan allows Rohan both relief and profound life-changing realizations. Echoing Wolochs argument, Safir's role is more significant than the narrative space devoted to him indicates.

Rohan's second meeting with Safir takes place after Rohan has not eaten and not left his room for two days (228). He is in Lucknow and is finding it hard to cope with his situation—unemployed, separated from his son, and something of a foreigner in his own city. After Safir reads out a *marsiya* to Rohan, he immediately feels a sense of relief. They start a long session of reading *marsiya*s, and Safir is so moved that his lips tremble (234). In an interesting comparison, Rohan asks Safir if he thinks the treachery displayed towards Ashwatthama in the final battle of the Mahabharata is comparable to that displayed towards Hussian at Karbala. Safir answers that he "cannot say,

and would need to read more," showing that the question was not out of place (237). Later Rohan and Safir witness a scene in the old city where a man receives news of the death of a relative and goes down on his knees, saying, "This whole world is Karbala" (268-71).[86] This line keeps "reverberating in his [Rohan's] head," and he cannot get over it (271). A large part of *Pārijāt's* narrative structure is built on collapsing the past into the present to create one undifferentiated, non-linear sense of time. Safir leads Rohan into the world of the Battle of Karbala and helps Rohan deal with the loss of his son, thus embodying the *marsiya*s as a living tradition existing beyond the reach of modernity and change.

During a long period when Rohan is back in Saudi Arabia working and saving money, Safir is the only one who calls Rohan on the phone. Ruhi, with whom he had stayed in India, and his father do not call him for months on end, and Safir's gesture touches Rohan so much that tears come to his eyes (388). In a reference to the class differences and Rohan's awareness of them, Rohan immediately offers to phone Safir back in order to save him money, but Safir tells him that he is phoning from a PCO (Public Call Office) and that there is no need to worry (389). While Rohan is away, he and Safir exchange letters whose contents are more about Rohan's education than about personal affairs. (These exchanges of letters also allow for another instance of repetition, which we have seen identified as one of the hallmarks of the *roman à thèse*). One of Safir's letters is extremely long and describes the Battle of Karbala from start to finish (421).

The last time Safir appears in the narrative, his role takes a surprising twist. He and Rohan leave for a trip to a grave outside Lucknow. On the way Safir asks Rohan to buy a bottle of alcohol and cigarettes in order to offer them at the grave. Rohan is shocked when it emerges that Safir's beliefs are deeply

[86] In a television interview (Tejasvini), Sharma talks about the Battle of Karbala as a historical story while also remarking that Karbala is also happening today, this being the reason she focuses on it (16:20).

unorthodox. After being challenged by Rohan, he quotes a couplet about the unity of different religions and expresses his acceptance for different modes of worship:

> *Ham ishq ke bande haiṁ—mazhab se nahṁi vāqif*
> *gar kābā huā to kyā—butk̲h̲ānā huā to kyā*
>
> We are slaves of love—unfamiliar with religion
> Be it the Kaaba—or the temple
> (460)

When they reach the grave Safir recites an Urdu couplet, and they both share a deep spiritual experience. Safir no longer looks like a youngster to Rohan but like an experienced man (461). He surprises Rohan with the following story:

> When [Mirza] Hadi Ruswa sahib was talking to Umrao Jan while writing down everything, she said he suddenly stopped and asked, "The things you're saying, are they all correct?"
> Umrao's answer was, "I don't know the law (*shariyat*), but the letters are correct."
> Hearing this Rohan burst out laughing. Safir kept on talking. "Brother! Today there are no open-minded people left in this world. Everything is connected to the discourse of vote banks and personal profit." (460)

Safir claims that religion has become tainted with base interests; he doesn't adhere to definitions that are only useful for "vote bank" politics and have nothing to do with religious or spiritual practices. In order to maintain the educational or ideological message of the novel, it is important that the readers are only exposed to Safir's unorthodox beliefs right at the end. This way he serves as a reliable guide, slowly adding to his credibility before taking his message one step further than expected. In the beginning he is described and characterized as a Muslim, and the reader would have no reason to think that he would ever offer alcohol at a grave. The relationship between Rohan and

Safir can be read as carrying the main message of the novel, which is to urge a return to older practices. The emotional power expressed in their brotherly relationship creates a bond that suggests a transcendence of the Muslim–Hindu divide. More precisely, as two individuals whose names point towards different religious backgrounds but whose histories and practices share much more than what sets them apart, Rohan and Safir's relationship is central to the ethos that *Pārijāt* promotes.

This structure of affinity across apparent difference is repeated numerous times, serving both to reinforce the "redundancy" characteristic of the *roman à thèse* and, more importantly, to stress how the relationship between two people of ostensibly different backgrounds can result in a new and fertile synthesis. The following section depicts other sets of relationships that serve to reinforce the novel's message of both communal harmony and disdain for Western culture.

Alison and her mother both have the same behaviour of crass indifference and egocentrism that is characterised as Western. Another redundancy is created by Rohan and Salim, a friend from Lucknow, who was going to marry a German woman but was "saved" at the last moment when she and her family's disdain of India and of Muslims became clear (127). Monis, Ruhi's brother, is working in the USA and forgets to respect his mother's feelings by not bringing his children home for her to meet them. He has become deracinated like Rohan, but for him there is no trauma to lead him back home and wrench him away from the West. Ruhi and her mother, Firdos Jahan, both live alone in Lucknow in big mansions maintaining a base for men such as Rohan and his father when they return from their travels and travails. Their rootedness in Lucknow is juxtaposed to Rohan and Prahlad's incessant travels throughout the world. Alongside Rohan's discovery of his roots, his father Prahlad goes through the same process of re-integrating himself into the Hussaini Brahman community and settling down to a more rooted lifestyle.

However, the most striking redundancy or repetition is the figure of Riaz and his similarities with Safir. In a brief episode, which can be seen as a mirror of Rohan and Safir's relationship, Rohan has an interaction with another unemployed man called Riaz. In this case, however, it is Rohan who inadvertently serves as the educator by letting Riaz read poems written by Rohan's grandfather. Rohan is unpacking his father's boxes in his father's new house with Riaz. Finding a poem by his grandfather, he is surprised that Riaz can read Urdu and asks him to read it (487-8). It transpires that Riaz has an MA in Urdu from Allahabad University but has not been able to find employment and is therefore doing odd jobs. He calls Rohan's grandfather's poem blasphemous (*kufra*), and they talk about it while reading more poems. Riaz suddenly bursts out crying, and it is unclear whether he is moved by the poems, is depressed because his education is of no use, or whether the emotional resonance of the poem is too much to handle along with the narrow interpretation of Islam that he has been taught or has adopted. All these questions remain unanswered, and Riaz does not appear again in the novel, consigned to the fate of so many educated youth who find no place in the national narrative. This is just one of many moments in the novel when a character is introduced in a short side plot that adds both to Rohan's experience and to the underlying ideological message of the novel. Riaz's emotional outburst serves to show how much Rohan has learnt during his journey, and it reminds the reader of Rohan's reaction to being touched by the *marsiya* for the first time.

9 Conclusion

> In this generation, no one is happy. (29)

> People who had been forgotten became familiar to Prahlad and Rohan and they were greeted in the street, the bazar and in the neighbourhood.

> The dark years disappeared from memory in the same way that a bat hanging upside down suddenly flies off. (499)

The trajectory *Pārijāt* traces is of a journey from alienation and suffering, caused by attraction to the West, back to tradition and its warm embrace. There is a clear line of argument in *Pārijāt* that opposes the idea of purity and tries to show how this idea is influenced by the West. While Sharma does not directly criticize orthodox Muslims or Hindus, she criticizes the ideas of purity and orthodoxy by identifying them with Western modes of thought.

In one of the many flashbacks of the novel, Rohan exposes the extent of his deracination and his desire to assimilate to the West.

> Those days he thought his country, his society, his own parents and relatives to be inferior and conservative […]. If he could, then perhaps he would have taken pride in belonging to the white race. Now at least his son will be raised like a white man. (384)

Only after the traumatic divorce and separation from his son, who will indeed be raised like a "white man", is Rohan ready to acknowledge the wisdom and richness of his own culture and religion. Rohan's beliefs place him in an ideal position to function as an example for Indian citizens. While not being clearly Muslim himself, he respects Islamic traditions and many of the other practices he is introduced to. This capacity, or capaciousness, serves as a model for communal relations that allows for the maintenance of individual traditions while at the same time promoting respect for other practices, even to the point of participation. Rohan's attraction and subsequent disillusionment with the West also serve as a marker of the dangers of Westernization and its consequences. One of Lukács' definitions of the novel is that it can be broadly described as "the way towards a man's recognition of himself" (80). Rohan's "recognition of himself" occurs as a consequence of connecting to his roots, while his attraction to the West, either through a white woman or through his

desire to "make money, make money", is shown to lead to suffering and emptiness (126). Having understood his origins, Rohan is ready to move on with his life by marrying Ruhi, whose behaviour and very name stand for spirit and tradition. His new life is juxtaposed to his spiritually impoverished, miserable, materialist and above all "Western" life prior to his divorce.

In the context of this thesis, Sharma's capacious vision stands in stark contrast to Manzoor Ahtesham's. Ahtesham presents both friendships and romantic relationships between Muslims and Hindus as the critical site where prejudices rise to the surface and tear inter-communal relations apart. Ahtesham's perspective is suggested by Rashida in *Sūkhā bargad,* which stages a world where there is a choice between following the path of love or maintaining one's religious identity. Rashida is unable to accept Vijay's marriage proposal since it threatened her Muslim identity (128). She cannot imagine a middle ground and becomes stuck in her dilemma, ending up neither part of her community nor married to Vijay. *Pārijāt* could not be more different. Ruhi provides Rohan with a place to stay and supports him while he is recovering from his divorce (455). She initiates her marriage to Rohan, who is nominally from another religion, and experiences no tension due to their different or not so different backgrounds.

The divergent attitudes expressed in Ahtesham's narratives and those of Wajahat and Sharma can partly be understood in the context of the Sunni–Shia divide. As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, Aamir Mufti's *Enlightenment in the Colony* talks about the process of minoritization. In Ahtesham's works this process is palpable in the way secular Muslims are marginalized in the decades following independence, facing the choice between a Muslim identity dictated from above and a loss of tradition by being merged with a secularism defined according to Hindu values. Without oversimplifying, Sharma and Wajahat's novels show that in India Shia culture may be less susceptible to the tensions produced by the process of minoritization. Through

a past of shared devotion and aesthetics, Shia culture finds ways to associate itself with the dominant "national narrative" since it is less tied to the looming presence of Sunni Pakistan. It seems that Sharma's conceptualization and resistance to minority is achieved by challenging those ideas that allow for neat divisions. Through participation in shaping the "imagined community" in a positive way, rather than a critical or despairing one, Sharma excludes herself from Deleuze and Guattari's definition of Minor Literature. While Deleuze and Guattari speak of the constricted space which demands deterritorialization, Sharma's views on liminal or marginal identities suggest spaciousness and the capacity to accommodate a variety of heterogeneous demands.

The final chapter focuses on Abdul Bismillah's novel *Apavitra ākhyān (Unholy Story,* 2008) in order to explore the relationship and balance between art and message. After discussing the balance between the *roman* and the *thèse* in Sharma's novel, I will argue that with Bismillah's novel the *thèse* takes over from the *roman*, creating a work that is more akin to a polemic than a novel.

Chapter Five: the Novel as Indictment

> He thought he was finally falling asleep, but every time he closed his eyes a question arose like a black stick: do Muslims in this country really have no importance?
>
> Abdul Bismillah (*Apavitra ākhyān*, 129)

1 Introduction

Apavitra ākhyān (*An Impure Story*, 2008), by Abdul Bismillah, is written in the style of an exposé that unmasks the parochial world view of both the Hindu and Muslim academic community and their lack of interest in overcoming their prejudices. The novel's dominant tone is one of anger and bitterness towards both Hindu and Muslim sectarian attitudes. The narrative consists of a chain of interactions between the protagonist, Jamil Ahmed, and the characters he meets, bringing to light their barely concealed bigotry. This mode of storytelling invites a direct comparison with Dalit literature, both for the theme of passing and the expression of anger as a guiding impulse.[87]

Just as in the case of the other novels discussed in this thesis, apart from Nasira Sharma's *Pārijāt,* the main protagonist bears many similarities to his author, Abdul Bismillah. Bismillah was born in 1949 in Uttar Pradesh, completed his PhD in Hindi at Allahabad University, and teaches as a professor of Hindi at Jamia Millia Islamia University in Delhi. He has published a number of novels, short-story collections and poetry books, along with two volumes of literary criticism in Hindi. His most celebrated work is the novel *Jhīnī jhīnī bīnī cadariyā* (1986), translated as *The Song of the Loom* (1996), a semi-anthropological representation of the lives of the Muslim weavers of Banaras by an uninvolved

[87] For a discussion of the different ways Dalit authors have registered their protests against discrimination, see Brueck, Hunt.

omniscient narrator. Jamil Ahmed, the protagonist of *Apavitra ākhyān,* is also a Hindi professor and writer who teaches in an institution with a Muslim majority. He suffers discrimination by Hindus who are not happy to have a Muslim encroach on what they feel is their territory and discrimination by Muslims who feel that, by teaching and writing in Hindi, he is acting against Urdu and Muslim culture.

The main themes I examine in this chapter revolve around (a) the tension between aesthetics and the political message of a work of fiction. Drawing on Wayne Booth and on scholarship on Dalit literature, I argue (b) that *Apavitra ākhyān* stands out from the other novels in this thesis by virtue of its emphasis on "telling" rather than "showing" the position of Muslims in a Hindu-dominated society. Through (c) an examination of both the way in which specific characters are constructed and the more general "character system" of the novel, I explore (d) the tension between the requirements of the narrative and the text's political implications. Finally (e), I discuss Bismillah's use of different Hindi registers in order to highlight the influence of the politics of purity on Hindi and the use of language as a tool for passing.

2 Reading for Plot?

Deleuze and Guattari's approach is extremely useful in contextualizing *Apavitra ākhyān,* and their theory of the three characteristics of Minor Literature provides a basis for an analysis of this novel. The first characteristic, the deterritorialization of language, points towards Jamil's use of Sanskritized Hindi and the upending of his interlocutors' and readers' expectations. Bismillah's deterritorialization is unique in that, instead of inserting words that can be traced to an Arabo-Persian source like Ahtesham does, he uses a high Hindi register that everybody associates with high-caste Hindus. That is, instead of deploying "foreign" words as a way of re-inscribing a Muslim

identity into an increasingly "purified" Hindi, Bismillah accepts this kind of Hindi and claims it as his own, challenging anyone to deny him the right to use it as he wishes.

Deleuze and Guattari's second characteristic, "the connection of the individual to a political immediacy", provides a useful perspective when analyzing Jamil's struggles with the Hindi publishing world. He is seen by Hindu authors and publishers through the lens of his religion and not his individual writing. At the same time, the Muslims who surround Jamil see his writing as a betrayal of his Urdu and Muslim heritage. Jamil's anger, which is so dominant in the novel, is directed exactly against being seen in terms of his religion rather than as an individual. The "political immediacy" of the crisis of Muslim identity in India is what shapes his interactions with both Hindus and Muslims.

Thinking through Deleuze and Guattari's third characteristic, "the collective assemblage of enunciation", sensitizes us to the constitutive tensions of a Muslim Hindi professor's individual story in the collective context of the minority Muslim community in North India and its relations to, and marginalization within, Hindi. Unlike *Dāstān e lāpatā*, for example, Bismillah's protagonist remains steadfast in the face of the pressures exerted upon him, thus allowing him to be seen as a representative of more than his own unique, individual story. Jamil the protagonist is purposively flattened out in order for him to accommodate Bismillah's wider message of outrage.[88] The implicit tensions between the categories of "flat" and "round" are related to "the collective assemblage of enunciation" in that a reading of *Apavitra ākhyān* accommodates genre issues and questions of balance between a work of art and a polemic or a political manifesto. The focus on the individual might compromise the focus on the collective.

[88] I am using E.M. Forster's distinction between round and flat characters in *Aspects of the Novel.*

While discussing *Pārijāt* in the previous chapter I focused on the tension between the *roman* and the *thèse,* that is, between narrative development and ideological message. Or, to quote Wayne Booth, the balance between "dramatic necessity and rhetorical function" (108). *Apavitra ākhyān* strikes a different balance, choosing the "rhetorical function" in the form of anger as the engine for the narrative. Meetings between Jamil and other characters usually take the shape of a dialogue in which each expresses or exposes his or her prejudices regarding Muslims or Hindus. The narrator uses a variety of unusual techniques in presenting the story: introducing the professors of the college he works for in square brackets, he says "[introduction will also be given here, but later]" (54). When he does finally introduce the professors, the narrator does so by devoting a paragraph or two to each one, including his nickname, forgoing any effort to connect them to the narrative. Indeed, most of the teachers introduced, fifteen in all, have no role and do not reappear in the narrative. The suggestion is that the nickname, or the label given to each teacher, is more important than their function as characters. Last on the list is Jamil himself, who is known as "the Muslim Hindi teacher" (72). By invoking nicknames, Bismillah reduces the character function to one neat formula emphasizing how Muslim Jamil is seen by the Muslim students and staff primarily through his unusual position as a Hindi scholar.

The unusual use of square brackets and the reduction of some of the characters to nicknames is followed by an even more unconventional formal device. *Apavitra ākhyān* stands out from the other novels examined in this thesis in that, after the story has ostensibly ended, a number of characters with whom Jamil has interacted write him letters in which they express their views about the arguments and discussions they have had with him! Rather than playing out their public views and private thoughts and feelings through narrative description or dialogue, here the characters are free to express themselves without any interruption or fear of reprisal, and they voice their prejudices in a

most direct fashion (157-167). For example, a Muslim man who Jamil has befriended sends him a long letter in which he warns Jamil that, even though he is accepted by Hindus, "the truth is that all Hindus are idol worshipers and can never be friends with Muslims" (166). This Muslim man goes on to say that during riots and crises Hindus will not care about Jamil's Hindi credentials:

> You can show them the Bhagavad Gita or the Ramayana, but in their eyes you'll remain a Muslim named Jamil Ahmed. That's it, no less and no more. And they will treat you like they treat other Muslims. (167)

The title "*Apavitra ākhyān*" can be translated as "unholy story" or "impure story". Is Bismillah playing with his readers by referring to both the impurity of people's prejudices and to "impure" storytelling techniques? Whatever the case, the novel wears its political message on its sleeve to the extent that it challenges its own literariness. Susan Suleiman uses Roman Jacobson's theory of the six functions of language to make this point:

> [There is a] hierarchy of functions […] either the text is oriented chiefly toward communication (in which case it is not "literary"), or it is "literary," but in that case the communicative function must be subordinated to the poetic one. (20)

In *Apavitra ākhyān* the "communicative function" appears to be more important than the poetic one. My discussion will focus on how Bismillah tries to communicate his perspective on Hindu–Muslim relations.

While this novel stands out from the other texts in this thesis in that it is an exposé, this characteristic is shared with many Dalit autobiographies, as will be discussed later in this chapter. Bismillah attacks the current order and exposes the gap between a politically correct Ganga-Jamuni discourse of communal harmony and the "real" feelings of both Hindus and Muslims.

Bismillah's social criticism is directed equally at Hindus and Muslims, and the novel focuses on instances of enmity rather than on social harmony.

Apavitra ākhyān's attempt to be even-handed is a gesture reminiscent of partition literature. Whenever the narrator or the protagonist criticizes either a Muslim or a Hindu, the criticism is always followed by a parallel story in which the major difference is the religious affiliations of perpetrators and victims. When Jamil reads a sign on the entrance to a temple that says "No entry for non-Hindus" (114), he immediately recalls a story about taking a non-Muslim friend to a mosque to teach him, when the Imam did not give him permission to pray (115). For each Hindu who expresses fear or hatred of Muslims there is a Muslim who expresses similar sentiments. This issue, having to do with equivalence in representation or balance in the narrative, is crucial to an understanding of the novel. *Apavitra ākhyān* is an indictment of both communities for their respective failures to overcome their prejudices. Moreover, by presenting internal Muslim dialogue as in the letter warning Jamil quoted above, Bismillah shows that Muslim prejudices are not necessarily a reaction to Hindu prejudices and that, although they might reinforce each other, they also exist independently.

The issue of equivalence or balance takes a generational twist, as is evident in a story that occurs to Jamil on a train. We are told that there is an elderly Muslim man in Jamil's compartment who wants to pray, but a group of young Hindu men refuse to move aside, saying: "If you want to pray, then go to some mosque; this is a train" (121). Before anyone can do anything, an older Hindu man from the next compartment says in a very polite manner: "Sir, please come here and pray" (*āie bābā, āp idhar ākar namāz paṛh līje*) (121). The man has a *tilak* on his forehead, and after the elderly Muslim has finished praying, Jamil goes to talk to him. Jamil asks him why he would help a Muslim, and the man answers that he believes all religions are manmade (122). He then proceeds to tell a story of how he came to befriend a Muslim man after meeting

him on a train many years before. The Muslim man was from Ajmer and invited him to stay with his family when they visited the gravesite (*dargah*) for the yearly commemoration (*urs)* of Moinuddin Chishti, one of the most famous and popular Sufi saints in India. The two families stayed together, ate separately and became close (122-123). Jamil is struck by this display of communal harmony:

> Jamil listened and thought.
> Thought and listened.
> Then without saying anything, he got up and went back to his seat. (123)

In the space of a few pages the narrator shows that Muslims can be both discriminated against in the most blatant manner and also be seen as belonging to the fabric of Indian society as much as anybody else. However, the basis of inclusion here is a shared religiosity, not shared secular ideals. Jamil's silence at the end of the story suggests that he lets the episode speak for itself. How can he be angry at Hindus when he meets such a friendly man? How can he believe in a joint future when he sees the threat from the youth? The age of the actors in this episode is important, as their youth serves as a marker of the spreading influence of Hindutva and the loss of common ground which still existed in the older generation, as the old man with the *tilak* demonstrates.

3 Jamil Ahmed: Identity, Language and Position

Jamil, the protagonist, is introduced to the reader while he is finishing his PhD on Hindi poetry. Since he is a Muslim he cannot find a university job and tries his hand at journalism. His experience of discrimination at the hands of the Hindu Hindi professors reminds him of one of his childhood experiences and one of his first tastes of discrimination. In his school Jamil had excelled at Sanskrit and had impressed a Brahman with his diction. The Brahman then

invited Jamil to read out aloud with him in front of the class. After complimenting him on his abilities, the Brahman asked:

> "What's your name, son?"
> "Jamil Ahmed."
> What happened later! The pundit became silent. The class was finished. The pundit's face started blazing red like a lamp. His eyes came out of his head like red balls. His lips started quivering like a headless chicken [...] then a cracking sound. Jamil's ears got boxed so much that the world became dark. He wet his pants. (21)

This scene of violence is followed by Jamil's father "showering blows on his back with a shoe" for "reading from the infidel's book" (21). This episode resonates with various scenes in Dalit autobiographies. In Omprakash Valmiki's autobiographical novel *Jūṭhan* (1997), Omprakash is beaten at school for drinking water from the communal hand pump. In both cases the boundaries are delineated from a very early age. The main difference here is that Jamil learns what is allowed and not allowed but, unlike Dalits in the Dalit literature, does not learn that he is inferior. His father does not defend him from the wrath of the Brahman but rather strengthens the lesson that there are boundaries between Hindus and Muslims. This childhood experience can be juxtaposed to Manzoor Ahtesham's descriptions of childhood in which the protagonists are shielded from Hindu–Muslim tensions. For Ahtesham the discovery of the limits of accepted and expected behaviour for Muslims occurs much later in life, on the cusp of adulthood.

The principle of equivalence is maintained throughout the description of Jamil's beatings by the pundit and his father. Jamil is punished by the Brahman for overstepping the boundary and by his father for not maintaining his separate identity. This is part of the continuous thread in the novel of laying blame equally on both communities for having no tolerance for boundary-challenging behaviour.

The politics of challenging boundaries resurfaces after the scene of Jamil being beaten. The narrative returns to the present and to Jamil's struggle to find a job as a Muslim Hindi teacher. There follows a discussion between Jamil and Nasim, a government worker who writes Urdu poetry (*śāyarī*). The discussion revolves around the familiar subject of whether a Muslim should write in Hindi, which I quote at length in order to show the pressures at work. Jamil and Nasim are reciting their poetry, but Nasim calls his *śāyarī* (i.e. *shāʿirī*, an Urdu word originally from Arabic via Persian meaning "poetry") and Jamil calls his *gīt* ("song", a Hindi word originally from Sanskrit):

> "Friend (y*ā*r), tell me this, why don't you write in Urdu?" Nasim was standing right in front of him now.
> "Why? Is it a crime (*jurm*) to write in Hindi?"
> "No, listen, don't interrupt me, listen to what I have to say..." Saying this, Nasim became serious. "Listen, why do you write poetry (*gīt*)? Why do I write *ghazal*s? Isn't it because we want to make a name for ourselves in literature (*sāhityā aur adab*)? We'll also become part of history, and students in schools and colleges will read our work..."
> [...]
> "So, do you think that your poems will be read side by side with Jayshankar Prasad's in a course?"
> "Why? Have people forgotten Malik Muhammad Jayasi?"
> Jamil also stood up.
> "But Jamil, why do you forget that Jayasi was a Sufi?"
> "And me?"
> "You are a Muslim. Which in present-day India means a Pakistani agent, got it?" (25)

Such are the pressures for a Muslim writing in Hindi from within the Muslim community. Jamil's interlocutor Nasim represents the dismay at "losing" a poet to the other side, as well as providing him with a warning about how Muslim authors and poets will not be acknowledged by Hindus. Revealing just how important this issue is, Jamil's over-defensiveness and insecurity are pointedly expressed when he immediately challenges Nasim: "Is it a crime (*jurm*) to write

in Hindi?" This language debate touches on raw nerves and is never discussed in calm tones. The use of the word "crime" links this scene to *Sūkhā bargad*, when Vijay the Hindu friend accuses Muslims of acting like guilty people for hiding their listening to Radio Pakistan (81). The lines delimiting the difference of identity between Muslims and Hindus are so fraught with tension that transgressions are called, or thought of, as crimes and thus associated with guilt. Jamil mentions Malik Muhammad Jayasi as an example of a Muslim who is celebrated in Hindi literary history. However, Nasim reminds Jamil that Jayasi was a Sufi and that they live in a different era. The discussion ends bitterly with Jamil promising, "I won't change either my name or my language!" (26).

Jamil's position within the Hindi academic world is another major site of tension in the novel. During his PhD days he is invited to his professor's house. Before his meeting with the professor begins Jamil already feels off balance, like "a tomato in a sack of potatoes" (28). Neatly capturing the experience of being in a minority, the image reveals how he both stands out and is much more sensitive than his surroundings. Professor Chaturvedi is a Brahman who speaks a highly Sanskritized register of Hindi, and Jamil speaks in the same way:

> Sir, tomorrow is the interview for the position of Hindi lecturer at the Samanata (i.e. Equality) National University. I have also applied. If there is a chance that you will give your blessing then... (*sar rāṣṭrīya samāntā mahāvidyālaya meṁ hindī vyākhyātā hetu kal interviū hai. Maiṁne bhī āvedan kiyā hai. Yadi āpke āśīrvād kī kuch āśā ho to...*) (28)

Professor Chaturvedi snubs him and recommends that he goes to work for a newspaper rather than apply for an academic position. Hindi departments have traditionally been controlled by Brahmans, and through his character Jamil, Bismillah, a Hindi academic himself, rails against this injustice. Professor Chaturvedi says:

> "Look Jamil, you're a good student." The headmaster started saying with love, "You're also a writer. Who can reject you? Keep looking at newspapers. If there is an opening in Shibli College Azamgarh, Halim College Kanpur or Aligarh Muslim University, then definitely apply for a position. If it happens then I will help you as much as I can." (28-29)

This "loving" tone tells Jamil in a direct way to stay out of Hindi departments in Hindu majority universities. Incidentally, Bismillah teaches at Jamia Millia Islamia University, a secular national university founded in 1920 as an alternative to the more community-oriented Aligarh Muslim University, which over the years has become particularly associated with Muslim teachers and students.

The Hindi professors at the university have a drinking session a few days after the meeting with Jamil. All those present and the names of the candidates discussed for teaching positions are upper caste and mostly Brahman or Kayastha (Saxena, Mishra, Shukla, Tripathi, Shrivastav etc.). One young professor puts Jamil's name forward:

> "How would Jamil be for that [post] sir?" All three professors froze. This suggestion was Dr Shukla's. Professor Chaturvedi stared at him. But he didn't budge. He added, "Jamil is also an outstanding student sir! He doesn't study Hindi for pleasure, Hindi is in his soul …"
> "Shukla ji," Professor Chaturvedi said, stopping him in the middle; "Please go and see when the food is coming." (31)

The subject is quickly changed, and although there is no moment of overt discrimination or explicit declaration of hatred towards Muslims, it is obvious that a Muslim teaching Hindi in their university is anathema to them. Jamil eventually finds a position teaching in a Muslim college and, after being turned down by numerous publishers, even manages to publish a collection of short stories. The beatings of his childhood and the clear delineation of boundaries are exchanged for more understated forms of discrimination.

Jamil calls his short-story collection *Spring in Autumn* (*Patjhaṛ meṁ vasant*), suggesting the possibility of regrowth and renewal despite decay. Is this the "autumn" of the Ganga-Jamuni culture? *Apavitra ākhyān* itself definitely focuses more on decay than on the potential for regrowth. If the tone of *Apavitra ākhyān* is so dark and despairing, one wonders why the narrator suggests the possibility for regeneration in the title of a fictional book within the fiction rather than in the narrative of the novel itself. The reception of Jamil's book is in line with the novel's critical tone. It is received just like any other book by a Muslim writing in Hindi: his collection attracts attention but he is looked at primarily or even solely through the lens of a Muslim writing in Hindi: "Even though he is Muslim and an Urdu speaker he composes in Hindi" (115). As we saw in Chapter One in discussing the reception of Manzoor Ahtesham's work, this fictional representation of the reception of Muslim writers in Hindi is an accurate representation of the reception of books like *Apavitra ākhyān* in the real world.

After Jamil's book launch, there is a party for "selected people" at a prominent publisher's house. A Hindu Hindi professor at the party raises his drink and as a compliment says: "His story doesn't feel like it was written by a Muslim" (117). The publisher offers Jamil a drink, saying: "Hey (*are bhāī*), all this is happening for you. The next collection will be published by *Alok*" (117). Jamil "shies away" and says he does not drink (117). One of the professors overhears this and says: "This is *harām* for Muslims […] even though he writes in Hindi, he's still a Muslim" (118). To everyone's surprise Jamil reacts by immediately taking a drink. Here Jamil is forced to perform his secularism in a way that is reminiscent of the father in *Sūkhā bargad* discussed in Chapter Two. Muslims need to prove continually that they belong in ways that members of the majority are exempt from. In *Sūkhā bargad* the father ate pork to prove his secularism to his Muslim friends, who tease him for not really being secular.

Here in *Apavitra ākhyān,* Jamil drinks alcohol to reject the label of conservative Muslim that would be placed on him, no matter why he chooses not to drink.

The difficulty, if not impossibility, of avoiding the stereotype of a Muslim writing in Hindi is highlighted in a conversation Jamil has with a Hindi publisher who wants to publish a collection about Muslims in India. This is their first meeting, and Jamil has learnt to be wary of publishers who see him as a Muslim Hindi writer rather than just a Hindi writer (131-136). The publisher asks Jamil to write about common stereotypes such as multiple wives, the "intolerance" of Muslims, etc. Jamil refuses, and the publisher changes his tone, asking him to write so that "some of their [i.e. Muslims'] differences will become evident" (132). This leads to an argument in which Jamil tells the publisher that Muslims are no different from any other community in India and that he refuses to write about their "long beards […] prayer marks on their foreheads […] kurta pajamas [and that] all the Muslims in India slaughter cows and eat their meat" (132). The publisher denies asking for all this, but Jamil interrupts him: "[You want me to write that] all Muslims are fundamentally terrorists!" (135). Jamil continues ranting in this vein, and the publisher, who has not said anything nearly as extreme, is forced to face Jamil's increasingly aggressive litany of complaints. The publisher defends himself, saying: "I believe all writers have only one religion—humanity" (136). Jamil responds by saying that he is still a Muslim writer in Hindi and leaves the office "like an arrow" (136).[89] The publisher is one of the characters referred to earlier who writes a letter at the end of the novel in which he continues to pigeon hole Muslims by asking Jamil to write about the burka and its effect on Muslim women (162-163).

[89] This fictional interaction is reminiscent of the journalist Suhail Wahid's descriptions of the difficulty of being a Muslim journalist and the expectation that he only write about Muslims. "Being Muslim in India" (discussed in the Introduction).

In addition to Jamil, *Apavitra ākhyān* features three female Muslim characters who represent three different possibilities of female Muslim identity. The following sections describe how they represent contrasting options for minority existence. Within the range of female characters discussed in this thesis—Rashida in *Sūkhā bargad,* Ruhi in *Pārijāt* and the three women in *Apavitra ākhyān*—we have an exploration of the different gendered options for being a minority. Bismillah positions Yasmin as a powerful woman who deploys her sexuality to achieve her goals. Vibha Ahmed similarly utilizes her identity as a Muslim and as a woman to gain advantage in the academic world. Jamil's wife Rabiya Devi, by contrast, represents a capacious feminine identity which refuses to participate in the chauvinistic drawing of boundaries between an "us" and a "them".

4 Yasmin: the "Token" Muslim

Yasmin surfaces periodically in *Apavitra ākhyān,* and the trajectory of her career serves as a parallel to what Jamil could have been had he been more politically astute and flexible with his morals and ideology. Yasmin represents the option of accepting, and thus reinforcing, the current power structure in exchange for getting a job and being used as a "fig leaf", that is, a token Muslim. Her PhD subject is "The Influence of Hinduism on Hindi Muslim Poets," and her research reinforces stereotypes rather than challenges them. This allows her to rise smoothly in the academic world. Even though Yasmin faces multiple sexual and familial pressures as a woman and is subject to political pressure from both Hindus and Muslims, she manages to maneuver her situation to her own advantage. Her desire for self-advancement renders her relatively immune to external criticism and self-doubt, and later in the novel we learn that she has succeeded as both a poet and a Hindi professor (44). She publishes a book entitled *The Culture and Customs of Indian Muslims* that is so popular that it sells

on footpaths everywhere (103). Yasmin is characterized as pandering to whatever the hegemonic view of Muslims dictates and as willing to further the "othering" of Muslims for her own personal success. She uses her identity as a woman and a Muslim to gain favours, rather than trying to fight against discrimination and prejudice.

The novel opens with Jamil and Yasmin returning to Yasmin's village. They are both Hindi students at university together and have become friends; there is also some underlying romantic tension. Jamil is taken aback when Yasmin puts on a niqab while riding in a rickshaw from the station to the village. When he asks her if she does it "out of fear or out of tradition," she refuses to see the difference (9). Yasmin's unquestioning strategic conformity to external demands and expectations remains a central aspect of her characterization throughout the novel and ultimately drives the two apart.

In a scene that mirrors the review of university promotions by high-caste Hindus mentioned above, Yasmin's father uses his influence to pressure a character named Dr Siddiqui into finding a university rather than a college position for his daughter. Dr Siddiqui claims that he has an idea how he can help Yasmin, but she demurs, telling Siddiqui: "Don't you know, the Hindi department in every university is under Brahman and Thakur domination (*varcasva*)" (75). Yasmin's father is taken aback by the use of *varcasva*, a term he does not know. He tells her "Shanno, how many times have I told you that at least at home this dirty language should not be used" (75). Yasmin apologizes and uses the Hindustani word (*bolbālā*) instead.

Dr Siddiqui hatches a plan that includes using the influence of a prominent Muslim politician and tells Yasmin that the job will definitely be hers. When the father hears that the name of the politician is Naqvi (a Shia name), he is taken aback and says: "If those people have to choose between Hindus and Muslims, they always prefer Hindus" (76). Dr Siddiqui reassures him: "Naqvi sahab isn't one of those Shias" (76). These exchanges are another

example of the way in which Bismillah uses each interaction to expose a social prejudice—earlier upper-caste Hindus against Muslims, here Sunnis against Shias.

The meeting between Yasmin and Naqvi Sahab is used to expose the corruption that feeds social prejudice. Yasmin and Naqvi Sahab sleep together, Yasmin currying favours through sex, Naqvi Sahab the powerful man eliciting sexual favours in return for fixing a position for a dependent woman:

> Yasmin moved slowly and came to sit on the bed. Naqvi Sahab closed his eyes as if he was entering samadhi. "I had something to tell you," Yasmin said while lifting her dupatta from the floor. He opened his eyes.
> "I know; Siddiqi Sahab told me everything."
> "So will you try and help me?"
> "I don't try things, I do things." Saying this, Naqvi Sahab turned to Yasmin. (79)

There are many layers to this scene involving questions of coercion, pressure and agency, but from Jamil's perspective Yasmin's use of her femininity serves as an unscrupulous way to procure her self-advancement. While this can be read as a male author portraying a woman's success in a male-dominated world as based on her willingness to trade sexual favours, the character of Yasmin can also be understood in terms of her willingness to "utilize" her Muslim identity. In line with her overall strategy for self-advancement, Yasmin deploys not just her femininity, but her religious identity as well.

In a later meeting, when Jamil goes to see Yasmin in her ostentatious office, she asks him not to address her with *tum*, insisting on the more formal *āp* (126). Jamil gives her a copy of his new book inscribed with a special dedication to her. She flips carelessly through the book and misses his personal dedication. She then looks up and says that there are three things that are impossible for him:

> "The first is that your name won't get acknowledged in the history of Hindi literature. The second is that none of your work will ever be included in an anthology."
> "And the third?"
> "You'll never win the Sahitya Akademi prize." (127)

The three points that Yasmin makes are a direct attack on the position of Muslims in Hindi literature. As already mentioned in the previous chapter, it was only in 2016, eight years after the publication of *Apavitra ākhyān*, that Nasira Sharma won the Sahitya Akademi award for Hindi—the first Muslim to do so. During her conversation with Jamil, Yasmin goes on to admit that she got her position due to the support of Naqvi Sahab, and at the very end of their meeting she criticizes Jamil for making the mistake of marrying a Hindu and thereby losing the support of Muslim politicians who would have promoted him as a Muslim candidate.[90] The irony here is that Jamil's wife is in fact Muslim and is mistaken for a Hindu since she wears vermillion (*sindur*) in her hair parting.[91] Yasmin's behaviour serves as a foil to Jamil's refusal to conform to expectations and fill the role of the token Muslim. He rejects the demand that he perform his religion along prescribed lines that leave no space for individuality. Like his wife, Rabiya Devi, who was educated in a village that promulgated the idea of a shared Hindu-Muslim culture, Jamil insists on the right to his own relationship with religion.

5 Rabiya Devi and the Ganga-Jamuni Culture

Rabiya Devi, Jamil Ahmed's wife, represents a remnant of the Ganga-Jamuni culture that continues to exist alongside characters such as Yasmin and Vibha

[90] In the section in the novel in which the characters write letters of disclosure, Yasmin writes to Jamil and boasts about being invited abroad as a Muslim writing in Hindi (157). She taunts him by saying that he could have been invited as well had he not married a Hindu woman.

[91] *Sindūr*, or vermillion, is a red powder applied to the hair parting to signify marriage among many Hindu communities in India.

Ahmed (see below). She grew up in a Hindu-majority village in which Muslim girls attached Devi to their name just like their neighbours (99). Moreover, as mentioned above, Rabiya Devi applies *sindur* to the parting of her hair like a married Hindu woman, causing confusion about her religious identity (99). Characterized as a simple village woman who does not understand her husband's literary activities, Rabiya Devi's straightforward commonsensical questions often leave Jamil speechless. Rabiya Devi reads Yasmin's book about Muslim customs and complains that it does not mention that Muslim women also put lamps on the hearth during Diwali (103). Her refusal to see Yasmin's problem in celebrating each other's festivals highlights the absurdity of characters such as Vibha Ahmed, who argue for clear divisions and hierarchies between Hinduism and Islam. Rabiya Devi's beliefs strengthen Jamil's, and there is never any quarrel between them regarding their practices or identity: "When on the night of Diwali Rabiya Devi put lamps on the threshold and the hearth, Jamil only smiled" (104). Jamil is not characterized as religious in any way and is happy for his wife to celebrate in the way she is used to, even if this is new to him.

6 Vibha Ahmed

Rabiya Devi's capacious religious identity is juxtaposed to that of Vibha Ahmed, who Jamil first meets at a literary party celebrating the publication of his book (118). The narrator informs us that Vibha Ahmed has recently converted to Islam and has a puritan attitude. Bismillah places Rabiya Devi and Vibha Ahmed side by side to explore the two different options for Indian Muslims. Both their names combine Muslim and Hindu names and seem to represent the potential for a composite Indian Muslim identity. Yet their attitude towards their identity could not be more different. Every time Vibha Ahmed meets Jamil, she lectures him about his behaviour and lack of religiosity. Jamil feels that she

has made a "career" out of her Muslim identity in a way similar to Yasmin. She insists on saying "*assalām aleikum"* instead of "hello" and performs her new religious identity on every possible occasion as when she lectures him about how alcohol is forbidden in Islam (119). After introducing herself, the first thing Vibha Ahmed asks Jamil is:

> "You… you drink this?" Vibha Ahmed said, putting her hand on her nose!
> "Why?" Jamil asked harshly. [Vibha Ahmed said] "You know this is forbidden (*harām*) in Islam." (118-119)

Vibha's behaviour is caricatured: she speaks in an exaggerated way (*filmī andāz*), and it seems that her knowledge about Islam is limited to knowing that alcohol is forbidden (118). Moreover, it appears that the reason Vibha Ahmed converted was to enjoy the advantages granted to minority individuals who, like Yasmin, are willing to be presented as a proof of equality, to function as "fig leaves" and not challenge the dominant power structure. The professional advantages of being a minority become clear when Vibha Ahmed is chosen to translate a Gujarati poet into Hindi for a national poetry event; she does not know Gujarati and has to use the English translation (124).

By enthusiastically adopting her Muslim identity as a tool of self-advancement, Vibha Ahmed reminds us of the figure of Rajab Ali, the politician in *Sūkhā bargad* (Chapter Two). Both Vibha Ahmed and Rajab Ali use the communal divide for their own interests, even if this means that they are co-opted or interpellated in a minority position, thus accepting and strengthening the processes of minoritization of the wider community. Both Manzoor Ahtesham and Abdul Bismillah create characters who portray themselves as representatives and defenders of the community. However, both these characters, Rajab Ali and Vibha Ahmed, are exposed as motivated purely by self-interest, and they use their position for self-promotion even when this can

be harmful to the Muslim community at large. Vibha's translation of Gujarati poetry, even though she is not qualified to make it, creates an opportunity for critics to say that minorities receive preferential treatment. This is one of the rallying calls of Hindutva organizations, which claim that minorities, and especially Muslims, are promoted at the expense of Hindus. Bismillah's portrayal of Yasmin and Vibha Ahmed is used to show that Muslims are often agents in creating a constricted version of Muslim identity. The next section focuses on Iqbal, a Muslim who decided to pass as a Hindu, rather than be forced to play the role of the token Muslim.

7 Iqbal Bahadur Rai

The only friendship that is represented in the novel, in fact Jamil's sole friend, is a journalist called Iqbal Bahadur Rai. Jamil met Iqbal after finishing university at a time when he had no work or prospects of work. Iqbal took him in when the alternative was sleeping in the park (34). After they had become friends, it emerges that Iqbal's real name is Iqbal Ahmed and that he has been passing as a Hindu in order to get work. The problems associated with passing are exemplified in an episode in which Jamil is the victim of discrimination. Jamil and Iqbal have stopped to have a snack, and the woman running the stall tells Jamil that she cannot allow him to drink the water since he is Muslim. So that Jamil the Muslim does not touch the water vessel, Iqbal the ostensible Hindu is required to help him. Jamil is obviously angered and tells Iqbal: "Today I learnt from the snack-seller's behaviour that I am a Muslim and you are a Hindu" (38). This event leads to a discussion in which Iqbal complains that: "We're second-class citizens. Even though this is a secular country, in reality it is a Hindu country" (39). When Jamil compares Muslims with Dalits in order to show that there are myriad social problems in India, Iqbal disagrees, citing the quotas reserved for Dalits in government jobs and noting the absence of any parallel

affirmative action for Muslims. The argument becomes emotional, and Jamil leaves, not seeing Iqbal again for a long time.

When they meet again a few years later, it emerges that Iqbal is still passing as a Hindu and has been forced to live in a Hindu neighbourhood since the neighbourhoods were segregated (89). Iqbal relates a funny but poignant story about passing. Even though the neighbourhood is segregated, there is a Shia family living in the neighbouring house, and they are celebrating Muharram. Iqbal's landlady is worried by the sound of the wailing coming from their house and asks him to go and see what is happening there:

> "And listen," I blurted, "it's nothing. It's a majlis, a Shia custom." What can I say—my landlord started interrogating me: "How do you know?", and "How do you know that they're Shias?" "What is this majlis? Until today we haven't heard of a festival that includes breast-beating and crying." (101)

Iqbal's passing was almost exposed, but he finally convinces his landlord and landlady that he knows about these customs since there was a Shia family in their village where he grew up. After this story, Iqbal and Jamil talk about work and use *he* (H) and *mīm* (M) to talk about Hindus and Muslims. Rabiya Devi is confused and in the rickshaw on the way home asks "What is this *mīm*?" (102). Jamil ignores her and does not answer.

While Iqbal receives little narrative space in the novel, he occupies a special space in Jamil's mind. In Alex Woloch's formulation, discussed in the previous chapter, Iqbal's important character function should not be confused with his minor character space. Towards the end of the novel, the tragic irony of Iqbal's death in a riot comes as a surprise to both the readers and to Jamil. Even though Jamil had not seen him for a while, he is visibly distraught when he receives the news that Iqbal has been killed. He returns home and sits down "with his head in his hands," not answering his wife's increasingly anxious

questions about his state (139). Iqbal had been working as a reporter and was still passing as a Hindu when he was killed by Muslim rioters (138). When Jamil finally tells Rabiya Devi that a friend of his has been killed, Rabiya Devi's asks who it was, and when Jamil does not answer she asks, "Was he a *he* or a *mīm*?" (139). Rabiya Devi has absorbed what *he* and *mīm* stand for, exposing the insidious influence of communal discourse. Iqbal, a Muslim passing as a Hindu, was murdered by Muslims who thought he was a Hindu. Ironically, the circumstances of his death suggest that Iqbal's passing was successful. Obviously Iqbal wanted to pass as a Hindu among Hindus and not among Muslims, but the complications and dangers of passing are not controlled by the individual who chooses to try and pass. Jamil manages to convince Iqbal's colleagues that Iqbal was really a Muslim, and finally Iqbal recovers his lost identity and is buried as a Muslim (140).

8 Language Passing

Before Iqbal's death, Jamil too uses the ambiguous markers of community in North India to experiment with passing. While Iqbal hides his religion in order to get a job, Jamil's aim is to explore and experiment with different social positions and to expose his interlocutors' prejudices. Throughout the narrative Jamil poses as a Hindu with other Hindus, but also with other Muslims. These moments are not premeditated and generally are a function of Jamil's use of chaste Hindi and his introduction of himself as a Hindi teacher. Employing a Sanskritized register, Jamil exposes the extent to which Hindi has been deterritorialized by Hindutva forces. His own use of this register reterritorializes it within a wider "Indian" rather than "Hindu" identity. Both Muslims and Hindus assume that a Hindi teacher must be a Hindu, thus returning us to the Hindi–Urdu debate. In exposing this popular prejudice or misconception, Bismillah, a Hindi professor himself, shows the strength of the

hold that the association of Hindi with Hindus has among different communities in north India.

The first description of Jamil's passing occurs during a train journey. Jamil is riding on a train when a stranger asks him where he is going. His first reaction is apprehension: "Questions, whatever they were, made him tense" (87). This sentiment is again reminiscent of Dalit literature and the threat of being discovered.[92]

While Jamil notes the man's big *tilak* on his forehead, the stranger learns that Jamil is a Hindi teacher and immediately assumes that he must be a Hindu. The in-group solidarity unilaterally established, the man starts a monologue about Urdu and recites popular conspiracy theories about Muslims in India:

> You know very well that this Urdu isn't the language of our country. It's clearly foreign. It's the Muslim's language. Giving importance to Urdu is giving importance to Muslims. And the purpose of giving importance to Muslims is to make them powerful. But those people are powerful anyway. They marry four times, have dozens of children and increase their numbers! Am I wrong? Now they have started making bombs in every one of their houses. Slaughtering chickens and goats, they practice their killing skills. If their freedom continues in this way, then one day all of us Hindus will regret it. Once again we'll be subservient to them. (88)

This list of received ideas is the clearest representation of the poisonous discourse towards Muslims that is widespread in contemporary India and circulates even outside Hindutva circles. Bismillah is the only writer studied in this thesis who directly represents and reproduces this litany of complaints and fears about Muslims. In passing as a Hindu, Jamil becomes privy to this fear and hatred of Muslims. Like many instances of passing, his is not an active case

[92] See, for example, Ajay Navarya's short story "Tattoo" in *Unclaimed Terrain*, in which the protagonist expresses the following sentiment while trying to avoid being asked about his background: "Then I asked myself why I was being so guarded, so vulnerable, and so aggressive when it came to caste" (116).

but on of mistaken identity that Jamil decides not to correct. Just after he hears this rant, Jamil's friend Iqbal boards the train by chance and calls out Jamil's name. The Hindu man is taken aback and asks Jamil if he is Muslim "while cleaning his pants, without raising his eyes" (90). Jamil takes pity on him and tries to calm him down, since the man is visibly distressed. This is the only instance in all the novels analysed in this thesis in which there is a reversal of roles: a Hindu character feels threatened by the presence of Muslim characters and becomes the de facto "minority".

> "You have no reason to be ashamed. You didn't say anything that is hurtful. And you didn't say anything about me anyway." Now the man lifted his head. Jamil's words had given him some relief. (90)

When the man commends Jamil on his excellent Hindi, Jamil uses the opportunity to correct the perception that Urdu is a language solely connected to Islam and foreign to India:

> What you were saying, that Urdu is a foreign language, that's also mistaken. Urdu is this country's language. Its very birth took place here. And it's also not true that Urdu is only the Muslim's language. Language can belong to anyone; religion has nothing to do with it. (90)

The man sits in front of him "shrinking into a figure of guilt," avoiding Jamil's and Iqbal's eyes (90). The man gains confidence and, shifting to the "accepted" Ganga-Jamuni discourse, tells them of his childhood in the village where he had Muslim friends and how he participated in Muslim festivals: "When it was Muharram, we would run in front of the *tazya* shouting 'Ya Ali, Ya Ali'" (91). The man goes on to list all the Muslim friends he had and how trustworthy they were. Jamil becomes impatient and asks him why he is saying all this. The man answers: "I think that the atmosphere influences everyone!" (91). Without mentioning Hindutva directly, the man is acknowledging its power to change

the discourse and relationship between Muslims and Hindus. He marks a clear boundary between a village or childhood "innocence" in which he could participate in Muharram and the contemporary present when the atmosphere does not tolerate such an easy mixture.

The structure of the narrative here exemplifies the difference between *Apavitra ākhyān* and *Pārijāt*. In *Pārijāt*, Sharma tries to reintroduce the ability to participate in Muharram, while Bismillah's narrative emphasizes its irrevocable loss. At the end of the novel, in the section in which the characters write letters to Jamil, this Hindu man retracts his apology and reiterates his hatred towards Muslims in an even clearer fashion. He says that the childhood stories about communal harmony "are all things of the past" (164) and attacks Muslims for partition and many of India's ills. Finally he quotes his guru, who says:

> The same way that the man named Hitler cleaned (*safāyā*) the Jews out of Europe needs to be applied to the Muslims of India. Until India is completely cleaned (*safāyā*) of Muslims, the sins of India won't be removed, and the country will not develop. (164)

Jamil's reaction to this experience of mistaken identities is to take a conscious decision to pass as a Hindu in order to explore how Muslims treat Hindus. He shares a rickshaw from the train station with a Muslim man. Their meeting starts as most meetings do between strangers in public, with mutual assessment: "The man looked at him closely. Jamil also examined him closely. Fair-skinned. Wearing a kurta pajama. A round cap on his head. A carefully combed black beard adorned his face" (92). After ascertaining he is Muslim, Jamil decides to speak in high-register Hindi, saying: "Very pleased to meet you (*āpse milkar baṛī prasannatā huī*)" (92). After Jamil asks for recommendations for food, the man, Abdu Salam Siddiqui, enquires of Jamil (who has not yet said his name) whether he eats meat (*mīṭ vīṭ khāte haiṁ*?) (93). Learning that he does, Abdu Salam invites Jamil to join him for lunch. Jamil answers in even more formal

Hindi, replying: "Certainly, what objection could I possibly have?" (*avaśya, mujhe bhalā ismeṁ kyā āpatti ho saktī hai?*) (93). Abdu Salam Siddiqui does not understand the words (*kyā? are hāṁ, samajh gayā etrāz*?) but gets the gist, and after making sure that Jamil does not object, they go to a Muslim restaurant where the meat is halal. Siddiqui orders two plates of food, "one 'small' and one 'big'" (94). Jamil stops him and asks for "big" as well, which surprises Siddiqui. At this moment, having ordered beef, Jamil tells Siddiqui not to worry: "I'm not a Hindu, my name is Jamil Ahmed" (94). Siddiqui is very surprised and tells Jamil that he was sure he was Hindu since "you speak their language so well" (94). This was the moment Jamil was waiting for, and he says: "No, no, I wasn't speaking the language of the Hindus, I was speaking Hindi. You must know that Mirza Ghalib also called his language Hindvi" (94). Siddiqui is forced to agree, and says:

> "Previously people abstained from eating with each other, but were pure in heart. And now? Now they sit and eat together, but their hearts are full of darkness." (95)

Since language plays such a major role in passing, the issue of the relationship between Hindi and Urdu is always present. In modern north India, where people from different communities dress in a similar manner, language is one of the only markers that can distinguish Hindus from Muslims. However, as Jamil shows, these divisions are often arbitrary. While Jamil uses a Sanskritized form of Hindi, this is still different from the high-register usage of some of the Brahman characters in the novel, such as the publisher and the Hindi academics. The Muslim characters such as Naqvi Sahab, who helps Yasmin get a job, and Siddiqui, the man who mistook Jamil for a Hindu, use an Urdu register which is represented in the book with Devanagari letters, thus adding to the complexity of the relationship between Hindi and Urdu. As mentioned in the introduction to the thesis, the title *Apavitra ākhyān* is itself a high Sanskrit register. The

juxtaposition between the Sanskrit title and the Muslim name of the author serves as a sign of Bismillah's preoccupation with the implications inherent in the use of different registers of Hindi.

9 Conclusion

The end of *Apavitra ākhyān* includes a scene in a village that moves Jamil to tears. Jamil and Rabiya Devi go to the wedding of Rabiya Devi's brother, a Hindu man with whom she's exchanged *rakhi* bracelets throughout her life. Jamil is surprised to find that Rabiya Devi's brother is a Hindu and is even more taken aback when he is received with warmth in the celebrations as a Muslim. Jamil is engaged by the groom's father who is almost blind, has no teeth and is "very old", and all the while Jamil is extremely tense, waiting to be exposed as a Muslim (151). The old man takes Jamil's hand into his own and starts talking to him without knowing who he is, since he cannot see and they have not yet been introduced. Without being prompted, the groom's father, speaking in village dialect, talks about how Muslims and Hindus used to get along in the old days. Jamil is surprised and even shocked by the way he and Rabiya Devi are received like family in a Hindu celebration. He goes to stand under a tree, crying for the first time in the novel. This cathartic ending points towards the under-developed theme of the decay of the Ganga-Jamuni culture. In this village the villagers maintain what has been lost by the more "cultured" city-dwellers.

The fact that Bismillah created a Muslim protagonist who writes and teaches Hindi literature should not be read solely as an autobiographical representation. Bismillah's preoccupation with the idea of minority, and specifically with the difficulties of Muslims in north India, suggests that this novel is as representative as it is autobiographical, thus bringing us back to Deleuze and Guattari's third characteristic of Minor Literature, the collective

enunciation. A Muslim teaching and writing in Hindi is in an exaggerated, exacerbated state of minority, since Hindi literature departments are more Hindu-dominated than other academic or business sectors. Moreover, in studying Hindi, Jamil becomes a minority among Muslims who cannot understand his choices and therefore suspect his loyalty to his Muslim identity. Bismillah's chosen task is not to explore the different effects that being in a minority exerts on the psyche of different protagonists, but rather to represent in fiction the underlying social difficulties of Muslims in contemporary Indian society.

Conclusion

1 Hindustānī Musalmān

Maiṁ kaisā musalmān hūṁ bhāī?
Maiṁ śiā hūṁ yā sunnī hūṁ?
[…]
Maiṁ gāṁv se hūṁ yā śahrī hūṁ?
Maiṁ bāgi hūṁ yā sufi hūṁ?
Maiṁ kaumī hūṁ yā ḍhongī hūṁ?
Maiṁ kaisā musalmān hūṁ bhāī?
Maiṁ sajdā karnevālā hūṁ yā jhaṭkā khānevālā hūṁ?
Maiṁ ṭopī pahen ke phirtā hūṁ yā dāḍhī uḍa ke rehtā hūṁ?
Maiṁ āyāt call se paḍhtā hūṁ yā filmī gāne ramtā hūṁ?
[...]
Maiṁ kaisā musalmān hūṁ bhāī?
Maiṁ hindustānī musalmān hūṁ
Dakkan se hūṁ, U.P. se hūṁ, Bhopal se hūṁ, Delhi se hūṁ,
[…]
Har ūncī nīcī jāt se hūṁ
Maiṁ hī hūṁ julāhā mochā bhī
Maiṁ doctor bhī hūṁ darjī bhī
Mujhmaiṁ gītā kā sār bhī hai, ek urdū kā akhbār bhī hai
[…]
Apne hī taur se jītā hūṁ
Dārū cigarette bhī pītā hūṁ
Koī netā merī nas nas meṁ nahīṁ, maiṁ kisī party ke bas meṁ nahīṁ
Maiṁ hindustānī musalmān hūṁ

What kind of Muslim am I, brother?
Am I Shia or Sunni?
[…]
Am I from a village or a city dweller?
Am I a rebel or a Sufi?
Am I devout or an imposter?
What kind of Muslim am I, brother?
Am I a devotee or an unclean eater?
Am I a skullcap wearer or a clean-shaven heretic?
Am I a reciter of Koranic verses or a singer of film songs?
[…]

What kind of Muslim am I, brother?
I am an Indian Muslim
I am from the Deccan, from U.P., from Bhopal, from Delhi
[…]
I belong to every high and low caste
I am a weaver and a cobbler
I am also a doctor and a tailor
In me there is a line from the Gita, and also an Urdu newspaper
[…]
I live my life my own way
I also smoke and drink
I have no politicians in my veins, am not under the control of any party
I am an Indian Muslim

Hindustānī Musalmān Hussain Haidry (Hindustani Musalmaan, accessed 5/7/2018)

Hussain Haidry (born in the 1980s) is an Indian spoken-word poet whose poem *Hindustānī Musalmān* "went viral" in 2017.[93] As he states in an interview published online:

> Most of my poems are personal and start with mein, and not hum. Same was the case with Hindustani Musalman, it was a very personal poem. But yes, of course, there was this small element of the Muslim monolith identity—how all Muslims are painted with the same brush. (Interview in dnaindia, accessed 5/7/2018)

Haidry's poem offers a good starting point from which to compare the novels and short stories read in this thesis with contemporary forms of expression disseminated online. Haidry, like the authors examined in this thesis, fights

[93] Millions of views across different platforms: see bibliography for internet sources, including interview with Ravish Kumar, a prime-time television anchor for NDTV.

against being "othered" or being interpellated into a narrow definition of Muslim. Since Haidry's form is the "spoken word," it fits neatly into neither a Hindi nor an Urdu label. In the absence of a textual representation to guide the listener, apart from transliterations into the Roman script, Haidry's text defies automatic or immediate categorization

The introduction to this work cited Gyanendra Pandey's rhetorical question: "Can a Muslim be an Indian?" Rather than addressing the question from the perspective of Hindutva nationalist discourse—can a Muslim whose religion is not autochthonous to India and whose loyalties are supposed to be divided ever be a "true Indian"?—this thesis has demonstrated how Muslim authors, through different narratives and different narrative strategies, have grappled with the pressures inherent in the process of national minoritization. How does it feel to be at the receiving end of this question? What tensions does being a Muslim, practicing or non-practicing, in Hindi-speaking north India entail?

The authors discussed in this thesis take different approaches to portraying the position of Muslims in Indian society and Hindu-Muslim relations in post-Independence India. Manzoor Ahtesham creates a complex and layered portrait of what happens to the psyche of minoritized individuals in *Sūkhā Bargad*. The cost of being minoritized is even more evident in *Dāstān e Lāpatā*. In *Pārijāt* Nasira Sharma chooses to eschew descriptions of individual struggle in order to "remind" the reader gently that Indians share much more than what sets them apart and that the real struggle is with the West. In *Apavitra ākhyān*, through an exposé that employs tropes that are familiar from Dalit literature, Abdul Bismillah highlights the discrimination that being a Muslim in the Hindi world entails. Finally, Asghar Wajahat's novels exhibit a lack of tension regarding Muslim identity in India. This is startling, particularly when juxtaposed with his politically charged short stories. All of these authors have created stories that place Muslims squarely as participants in the national

narrative expressed through Hindi, the national language. By making their stories intelligible they all come together, in their own way, in the project of re-inscribing Muslim belonging in Hindi and, by extension, Muslim belonging in India.

Deleuze and Guattari's definition of Minor Literature as "that which a minority constructs within a major language" (16) helps clarify the specific kind of minority the Muslims constitute in post-Partition India and the nature of the Hindu majority's claim over Hindi. The minority status of Muslims is, of course, connected to their religion, but the site of tension is not religious but national: thus, they suffer from being a *national* minority. The association of Muslims with Urdu, Hindi's "fraternal twin" in the era of national languages, adds a layer of complication to Muslims writing in Hindi.

Deleuze and Guattari's three characteristics of Minor Literature—"the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation" (18)—have been invaluable in teasing out different layers of these texts, foremost among them what Jameson called the "Political Unconscious". Jameson's theory sheds light on how the discourses regarding the position of Muslims in relation to the Indian state effects the protagonists' ability to fulfill the potential of their lives. Using Jameson along with Deleuze and Guattari allows not just a social analysis but an examination of micro-level practices at the level of personal interactions. The protagonists struggle to sustain relationships across community lines in their attempts to achieve existential security. Fictional narratives are particularly adept at registering the discomfort and the conscious and unconscious reactions of, and between, characters. To choose just two striking examples, we can recall Zamir's debilitating disease in Ahtesham's *Dāstān e lāpatā* and the raw manifestation of fear by the intellectually disabled protagonists of Wajahat's *"Maiṁ hindū hūṁ"*.

The idea of the deterritorialization of language is especially helpful in discussing the specter of Urdu's connection to Hindi. While Hindi had been mobilized as a national language even before Independence, to some its close links with Urdu are an unwelcome reminder of Islam's long history in the sub-continent and its role in whatever defines Indian culture. Muslims writing in Hindi—whether they "surprisingly" use a Sanskritized register or bring in a wealth of Perso-Arabic vocabulary and references to Muslim lived culture—are a reminder of this long history and undermine the claim that Muslims are alien to Indian culture.

While Muslim writers in Hindi clearly respond to a series of local discourses and pressures and to specific forms of marginalization, the way they shape their concerns and the narrative strategies they employ invite comparison with other examples of minoritization and Minor writing. For example, there are striking similarities in terms of themes and narrative strategies between Palestinian Israelis writing in Hebrew and the Muslim writers in Hindi examined in this thesis.[94] This was originally the starting point of my project before I decided to concentrate on Muslim writers in Hindi, and it seems only fitting to conclude my dissertation with some comparative observations These comparisons deepen our understanding of literary responses to "othering".

2 Comparing Minorities

> My dad says that an Arab will always remain an Arab. And he's right. He says that the Jews can give you a feeling that you are one of them and that you can love them and think they're the greatest people you've ever met. But at a certain stage you understand that you don't stand a chance. For them you'll always remain an Arab. (76)

[94] Palestinian Israelis are Palestinians with Israeli citizenship. They therefore differ from Palestinians in the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip.

> In twelfth grade I learnt for the first time what '48 was. That it was called the War of Independence. In twelfth grade I learnt that Zionist wasn't a curse word. I knew the word Zionist, we used it to curse each other in school. I had always thought it was a fat, bear like man. I realized that it was an ideology. In history class I started understanding that my aunt in Tulkarm was called a refugee. That Arabs in Israel are called a minority […] In bible class I learnt that Abraham was Isaac's father. In twelfth grade I learnt that it was Isaac who was replaced by a lamb, not Ishmael. (117)[95]
>
> Sayed Kashua '*Aravim rokdim* (*Dancing Arabs)*

The two passages above, from Sayed Kashua '*Aravim rokdim* (*Dancing Arabs,* 2002), deal with the protagonist's traumatic integration into Israeli society when he is sent to a Jewish boarding school where he is only one of two Arabs. Palestinian Israeli Sayed Kashua (b. 1975) has explored the different conflicts and tensions of Palestinian citizens of Israel in newspaper columns, novels, and two television series. The tense and conflictual relationship between Kashua's male protagonists and their fathers has been especially helpful in thinking about these same relationships in Manzoor Ahtesham's novels. In both Manzoor Ahtesham's *Sūkhā Bargad* (Chapter Three) and Sayed Kashua's '*Aravim rokdim,* another dissensual *Bildungsroman*, the main protagonist has an extremely difficult relationship with his father, who pushes the son to succeed and integrate into the majority society while at the same time requiring him to maintain his own separate communal identity. That this is an impossible bind is made palpable by the failures of the two fathers themselves, neither of whom achieve such a balance.

In Kashua's third novel, *Second Person Singular* (*Guf sheni yaḥid,* 2010) the Palestinian Israeli protagonist passes as a Jew in order to integrate into Israeli society and find work. This same choice is made by the character of Iqbal in

[95] The Hebrew translations are my own.

Bismillah's *Apavitra ākhyān* who passes as a Hindu in order to get work as a journalist in a Hindi newspaper. Unlike Iqbal who is murdered because his passing was successful, Kashua's protagonist ostensibly succeeds, managing to integrate into Jewish Israeli society. However the price involves cutting off his ties with his past and this proves too much for him. The novel ends ambiguously with the possibility that the passing might prove to be unsuccessful after all.

Another Palestinian Israeli writing in Hebrew, Anton Shammas (b. 1950), employs a highly fragmented narrative in his acclaimed novel *Arabesques* (1986), with a protagonist who has multiple selves. This is similar to Ahtesham's *Dāstān e lāpatā* in which Zamir, the protagonist, has a shadow self (the *lāpatā* Bhopali) that accompanies him everywhere and disrupts his life. Strikingly, both novels play with the reader's expectations by continuously blurring the lines between the author and the protagonist thus destabilizing the borders between fiction and autobiography. Both novels resist the "othering" of minority characters by not providing a stable, coherent portrait of the protagonist that can be neatly explained and used as a representative example.

I am not alone in drawing parallels between the trajectories of India and Israel, but to the best of my knowledge there has been no comparison of Hebrew and Hindi literatures.[96] Comparing the writings of Palestinian Israelis

[96] The last decade has seen a sharp rise in comparative work, much of it between Indian and Israeli legal and political structures, since both are based on the British system. I have included the full title and date of publication here to show their recentness and similarity in subject matter. See especially *The Challenge of Sustaining Democracy in Deeply Divided Societies: Citizenship, Rights, and Ethnic Conflicts in India and Israel* (2010) by Ayelet Harel-Shalev; "Ethnocracy, Israel and India" (2015) and "Fascism Without Fascists? A Comparative Look at Hindutva and Zionism" (2016) by Satadru Sen. See also Carrie Antal's "Reflections on Religious Nationalism, Conflict and Schooling in Developing Democracies: India and Israel in Comparative Perspective" (2008), Josh Goodman (2009) "Divine Judgment: Judicial Review of Religious Legal Systems in India and Israel", and Akanksha Mehta's unpublished thesis *Right-Wing Sisterhood: Everyday Politics of Hindu Nationalist Women in India and Zionist Settler Women in Israel Palestine* (2016). See also Perry Anderson's *The Indian Ideology* (2012) for a fascinating

like Sayed Kashua and Anton Shammas with Indian Muslims allows us to discuss local issues in a larger perspective. Several commonalities emerge from the comparison, including the question of partition (of the Indian Subcontinent and of Israel/Palestine); the creation of national identity; minority consciousness and the "anxious and agonistic formation of selves" (Mufti, 244); and the question of national language. These shared issues can be better recognized, defined, and understood through a comparative perspective. Palestinians in Israel, and Muslims in India, are crucial for the ongoing creation of a national narrative of state identity, what Mufti calls the "dialectical process of the mutual determinations of nationality and minority" (245).

As Mufti and others claim, Zionism and the state of Israel serve as a clear example of the modern nation state and its ideology:

> The inherent failures of the nation-state system, the recurring crisis it engenders about 'national' peoples and 'minorities,' is condensed into concentrated form, and revealed with unrelenting clarity, in the conflict over Palestine and the nature of the Jews and Palestinians as distinct peoples. (Mufti, 38)

The particular situation of Palestinians in Israel makes us aware of currents and processes that are partially obscured in other nation states. Palestinian Israelis make up roughly twenty percent of Israel's population, i.e. a very sizeable minority, larger than the fourteen percent of Muslims in India, and we can analyze the interplay between the minority and the state with more clarity than in situations where older modes of social relations obscure the newer, national process of marginalization. In Israel the "institutionalized ethnic dominance" (Smooha 1990, 289) of the Jewish majority is much clearer and the founding

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comparison between Indian and Israeli politics. For a comparison between Zionism and Muslim separatism, see *Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a Political Idea* (2013) by Faisal Devji.

ethos of equality, secularism and democracy does not exist there as it does in India. By dint of living in the same country, and in the absence of discriminatory laws, Palestinians have been allowed to participate in a limited way in Israeli society but have never been incorporated as equals in the structures of state power such as government and state bureaucracy.[97]

Notwithstanding different attitudes, historical trajectories, and provisions guarding minorities, both Palestinian Israelis and Indian Muslims deploy similar narrative techniques and their narratives of minority resonate with each other. For example, in both literatures, friendships and romantic relations between communities are possible, but they inevitably collapse as the characters belonging to the majority cannot fully understand the minority struggles. This recurring structure shows that while individuals from both the majority and minority communities can be portrayed sympathetically, in the end the effects of the pernicious discourse towards the minority ends up ruining the possibility of relations. The force of the state, or majoritarian narrative, is shown to have far reaching power.

All these points are not to claim a similarity between Israeli Palestinians and Indian Muslims per se, but rather to frame and emphasize local forms of marginalization within the wider context of the nation state. The convergence between India and Israel has to do with a shared narrative of a revival of ancient times, including an emphasis on the revival of ancient languages, Hebrew and Sanskrit (or at least Sanskritized Hindi), a return to self-rule after centuries of subjugation and an insistence on never being "weak" or victimized again.

The current politics of both India and Israel evidence an even harder attitude towards national minorities. Moreover, led by chauvinistic leaders,

[97] For a detailed report of the participation of Palestinian Israelis in Israeli politics, see Smooha (1997).

both states have been finding much shared ground and seem to be growing closer to each other. India is being led by Hindutva forces which promote a Hindu rather than secular national ideology, specifically targeting Muslim citizens. Alongside its continuous aggression towards Palestinians, Israel has started to enshrine its discriminatory practices against its own Palestinian citizens in laws which deny the very idea and promise of equality for all. I do not know if Minor Literature can continue to be written in such conditions as arguably, it can only be written as part of a struggle for equality in which both inclusive forces of secular and liberal discourses, and exclusive majoritarian forces share power rather than a situation in which the majority suffocates and silences the minorities. In 2014, against the background of yet another military campaign in the Gaza Strip, Kashua made a very visible departure from Israel; in his parting column "Why Sayed Kashua is Leaving Jerusalem and is Never Coming Back: Everything people had told him since he was a teenager is coming true. Jewish-Arab coexistence has failed", he said:

> I don't know how much longer I can go on writing in Hebrew, I don't know how many Hebrew speakers will still want to listen to me; I'm not sure there will be any point left to addressing them. (Haaretz, accessed 5/7/2018) [98]

Like Anton Shammas who gave up writing in Hebrew and moved to the United States, Kashua also immigrated to the United States. The United States looms large in Ahtesham's and Wajahat's fiction and central characters move to the United States to start a new life there after giving up hope of a future in India.[99] From what I have been able to ascertain from talks with academics, and Hindi

[98] See also Kashua's essay in The Guardian (Guardian, accessed 19/7/2018).

[99] See Parveez in *Sūkhā bargad* (Chapter Two, the section titled Friendship and the Public Sphere). Also, Achan in *Dāstān e lāpatā* (Chapter One, the section titled Cross Communal Friendship). Finally, see the unnamed protagonist of *Sāt āsmān* (Chapter Three, the section titled *Sāt āsmān).*

authors and Hindi publishers' book catalogues, there seems to be a decline in Muslims writing fiction in Hindi.[100] While the reasons for this are obviously overdetermined, it is nevertheless important to note this point, especially in light of the despair voiced in Ahtesham's and Bismillah's fiction.

[100] Meeting with Alok Rai, Department of English at Delhi University (London 2016), Apoorvanand, Department of Hindi at Delhi University (Delhi 2015, London 2016). Correspondence with Firoz Khan who teaches Hindi literature at Halim College in Kanpur and has written a number of books and articles about Muslim writers in Hindi. Interview with Manzoor Ahtesham (Bhopal 2016).

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