



Altering Time, Altering States: Contemplative Geopolitics in the South Asian Anglophone Novel

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ARTICLE



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ABSTRACT

A high orientalist text, but one that has influenced and continues to influence many postcolonial writers, Jorge Luis Borges's story "The Garden of Forking Paths" imagines a Chinese garden-text that tracks all courses of actual and possible events, making all timelines, both real and virtual, seem equally present and deeply connected. Versions of this enhanced, multi-dimensional temporal awareness appear in the work of several Asian and Asian diaspora writers as they grapple with cataclysmic historical moments, from World War II to contemporary violent outbursts, and consider counter-narratives, ways events might have been otherwise. Using Haruki Murakami's fiction as a departure point for examining the South Asian diaspora fiction writers Michael Ondaatje, Amitav Ghosh, and Karan Mahajan, this paper explores factors that enable the presentation of enhanced time consciousness as linked to a mindfulness practice or that conversely predispose such apprehensions of deep temporal connectivity to become fleeting epiphanies, ones often tragically tied to global politics and globalizing technologies.

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1. MISSING PRACTICE

An intriguing premise: Suppose you realize you have about six hours left of freedom, after which you'll be apprehended, detained, and executed. But you think of an ingenious way to complete a wartime intelligence mission before this fate befalls you. Your mission is to reveal to your superior the name of a hidden enemy military base so that it can be bombed. Your tactic is to kill a man with the same name as that of the base's location. That way, this name and yours will both make the headlines, communicating your message to your superior.

This is the plot of Jorge Luis Borges's 1941 World War I spy story "The Garden of Forking Paths," a highly condensed tale that presents us with a strangely textualized wartime tactic, a paradoxically compressed and expansive conception of fate, and a model for successive Asian diaspora writers' meditations on history. The Chinese spy, working for Germany, completes his secret mission just in time. But the twist is that in doing so, he finds that the man he kills turns out to be a Sinologist who possesses his family's lost ancestral treasure, a manuscript for a novel with a radically alternative conception of fate and time. This strange Chinese novel, also called "The Garden of Forking Paths," treats all possible character fates as equally real, equally actualized in the text. In other words, everything that could have been otherwise for its characters is somewhere played out. And to entertain the very thought of such a structure, in Borges's story, is to somehow actualize it. Thus the plot culminates with our spy protagonist completing his mission, committing the murder as his pursuer closes in. But in learning of the strange manuscript, he finds his senses awakened, and he can now feel an uncanny swarming of countless simultaneous, alternative fates around him.

What if, instead of a wartime act of murder, a mindfulness practice could bring you to this state? The widely translated and highly popular contemporary fiction of Japanese writer Haruki Murakami provides good examples of this alternative. To shift history and shift from one temporal universe to an uncanny parallel one, his characters retreat from worldly life, enter altered and liminal states of consciousness, and often return gifted with alternative healing powers. Toru in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (1997), for example, sits at the bottom of a disused well, cultivating a sense of bodily dissociation that enables something like astral travel. And in *Kafka on the Shore* (2005), Kafka Tamura retreats to a cabin in an abandoned forest, exploring its wooded depths until all paths are lost and a *bardo*-like zone opens up, one in which crucial character quests are fulfilled. Such Murakami characters also find themselves suddenly becoming energy healers and empathic animal communicators. The mysterious woman Nutmeg in

The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle performs acts of hands-on healing that look a lot like *reiki*, and she instructs Toru in such healing as well. And *Kafka on the Shore*'s equally enigmatic Mr. Nakata not only emerges from a childhood coma able to converse with cats but also, years later, wakes up from a multi-day sleep to find he knows how to administer shiatsu treatments.

Without pursuing a detailed analysis of the emergence of what we might call "energetic realism" in contemporary world literature via Murakami, we can nonetheless cite this formation to observe an important contrast. For Murakami, the apprehending of multidimensional temporal universes or the channeling uncanny energies across dimensions can be linked to meditative, contemplative, and energetic practices, with varying degrees of secularization—that is, detachment from an explicitly institutionalized religious context. But this formation isn't pervasive in the Asian literature that gets popularized or canonized as "world literature." Taking up examples from contemporary Anglophone South Asian diaspora texts, texts that constitute a massive influx of Asia-related fiction into what circulates variously as "world" or "global" literature, we can trace an intriguingly divergent mode. In South Asian Anglophone novels, again and again, at narrative crises and crucial historical junctures, something like a Garden of Forking Paths opens up. A character or a narrative itself beholds historical time as if it were a logic tree, as an "if only x, if only y" train of thought is invoked and something like a quantum shift is desired. But without access to an efficacious practice or world that would support such a practice, no sustained form of meditation or healing happens. The apprehension of a temporal or historical multiverse is contained as a fleeting epiphany and becomes part of a dystopian or elegiac mode, a practice of, if anything, mourning.¹ As with the act of murder committed by Borges's spy, the beholding of multidimensional energy fades as it feeds back into history. Irreversible acts of world-historical significance are committed and the garden is lost. Transmission is subsumed by mission. But in the gap where practice doesn't happen, intriguing engagements with technology often do. And these raise important questions about the sacred and profane.

2. A WORLD APART

Giorgio Agamben (2009) has recently proposed a counterintuitive interpretation of the sacred and profane in our time, one worthy of extended retracing. In "What Is an Apparatus?," he claims that we live in an unprecedented era of apparatuses, and hence of sacralizations. Early Christians, he says, used the Greek term *oikonomia* to describe the tripartite economy of the holy trinity, and to rationalize the way God could be both

one and three. If God could entail a spirit that remains holy as well as a son who helps manage his affairs on earth, then *oikonomia* lets us conceive of a separation of divine being from worldly history. And while this separation is meant to be provisional and strategic, a basic fracture sets in nonetheless. For Agamben, it's through similar strategic separations that we arrive at the concept of "the human" as a being that, as Martin Heidegger famously claimed, is not entirely captivated by its environment as animals supposedly are. What better mark of our not being entirely absorbed in natural habitats than our propensity for technology? It's with our very apparatuses, conceptual, cultural, or mechanical, that we mark out our special status as humans—that is, as beings able to apprehend our environments *as such*.

But it's with these same apparatuses that we block out contemplation of the world *as a world*, as we instead become utterly absorbed with our apparatuses (Agamben fixates on the cell phone as an example). For Agamben, every apparatus implies a form of subject-making. We make ourselves over in the images of our apparatuses, in the images of our forms of economy and governance, or better, they make us over in their image. But today in our world of unprecedentedly numerous strategic separations and massive absorption by devices, the apparatus causes as much subject depletion as it does subject-making (or as much desubjectification as subjectification). One might be tempted to call a world of the endless proliferation of divisive devices and machinations "fallen," the ultimate in profanity. But for Agamben, this world is actually one of hyper-religiosity—that is, a world of extreme *oikonomia* and sacralizing separations. In fact, for Agamben, profanity would be a good thing. Or rather, "profanation" in its original sense—that is, the restoration to common use of what had been set apart as sacred—would be a much-needed countermeasure to our era of hypertrophied separations. In other words, when we fail to restore the garden to the common world via a form of sustained practice, we continue to get the subject-depleting world of government for its own sake and devices as ends in themselves. We continue to be absorbed by a world jam-packed with apparatuses.

What kinds of paths to and from this very topical notion of the sacred do we see, then, in important Anglophone South Asian diaspora novels, particularly those that treat enhanced time consciousness and technology conjointly? Three key authors and their historically based fictions, published over the last three decades, will sketch out my narrative: Amitav Ghosh, widely known for his longstanding advocacy of specifically Asian cosmopolitanisms, as his Opium War-themed novels in the *Ibis Trilogy* (2008–2015) and his 2012 Association of Asian Studies conference keynote address concerning Indo-Chinese hybridities attest; Michael Ondaatje, who rode the wave of late twentieth-century popularity for

writing by the South Asian diaspora to international fame with his 1992 Booker Prize-winning, World War II-themed novel *The English Patient* and its cinematic adaptation; and Karan Mahajan, a finalist in 2016 for the US-based National Book Award for Fiction for his novel *The Association of Small Bombs*, which brings the engagement with terrorism seen in such bestselling post-9/11 Anglophone Pakistani novels as Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* back to an Indian context. Ghosh, Ondaatje, and Mahajan all address religion, technology, and crises in history, bringing these concerns to bear on depictions of those most divisive and tactical of activities, warfare and terrorism. While Borges's story looks back on World War I archival documents in the form of a soon-to-be-executed spy's deposition and Murakami's *Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and *Kafka on the Shore* incorporate old documents from World War II, the three novels I discuss here—*Flood of Fire*, *The English Patient*, and *The Association of Small Bombs*—are all more directly placed in their eras of interest: the Opium Wars for Ghosh, World War II for Ondaatje, and the ongoing Kashmir conflict for Mahajan. While none of these novels depicts in experiential detail a mindfulness practice that can enable a transformative beholding and remolding of human history, all three suggest there is something to be gained in our taking on the burden of an awareness of our own destructiveness. Indeed, it is the distinctive trait of these novels, of the new medium they propose, to seek mindfulness in destruction's unsettling midst and even in its means.

3. MYSTERIOUS MACHINATIONS

Published between 2008 and 2015, Ghosh's Opium War-themed *Ibis Trilogy* redeploys a stock figure of Indian fiction, the babu, and far from making him the familiar disempowered, malapropism-spouting mimic man, Ghosh makes him a mysteriously machinating, mystical figure (while still retaining the malapropisms). A Vaishnavite (a follower of a particularly devotional form of Hinduism) who has now entered the business world, Baboo Nob Kissin becomes the shipping agent for one of Ghosh's least likable opium merchants. Baboo advances the plot with crucial power plays, alternately helping sympathetic and, as the trilogy advances, increasingly unsympathetic characters. *Flood of Fire* (2015), the trilogy's last volume, is particularly obsessed with military detail and the technological advances that will account for the West's Opium War victories. We witness a crushing trouncing of China, and at a climactic late moment, Baboo makes a literal *deus ex machina* appearance as a winch loads him onto a departing British ship but freezes, briefly suspending him mid-air. We're told, "The skies too seemed to conspire on casting a heavenly light on the suspended figure—for just at that moment an

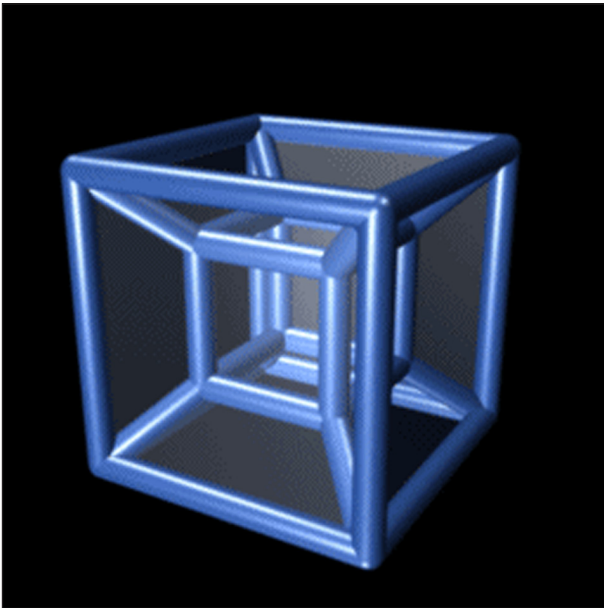


Figure 1 *Tesseract*.

opening appeared in a bank of clouds, allowing a beam of sunlight to shine down upon the swing” (Ghosh 2015, 508). In this halo, it’s impossible to tell whether Baboo is man or woman, and it is only when he lets loose a “thunderous invocation” and the sepoy respond in kind that the winch again moves. Recognized as a pundit by a confused sepoy, Baboo is asked when he lands on deck what the war has been all about. He tells the inquiring sepoy, “Do you not know that we are in Kaliyuga, the epoch of the apocalypse? You should rejoice that you are here today fighting for the Angrez. It is the destiny of the English to bring about the world’s end; they are but instruments of the will of the gods” (509). When the stunned sepoy still doesn’t get it, Baboo elaborates, “The sooner the end comes the better. You and I are fortunate in having been chosen to serve this destiny: the beings of the future will be grateful to us. For only when this world ends will a better one be born” (510). A technicized political theology becomes the mission actualized throughout the trilogy. And what it intends to transmit to future beings is its own destruction and a clean slate. There is an irony here. This is a work of untimely fiction: it is meant to be historical and contemporary at once. Thus, Ghosh might be read as offering us the solace that even those in the nineteenth century can be imagined as wishing for better times *after* us.

Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* is likewise untimely. Set at the close of World War II, the characters occupy a bombed-out Italian countryside and contemplate its renaissance relics, flipping the 1940s to engage the 1490s, which themselves look back on classical antiquity and gesture forward toward the era of the novel’s composition, the 1990s (the years of the author’s late forties). The Sikh sapper Kip is particularly awed by the Christian frescos he views, wanting to restore their sense of human character to a world in

which, we’re told, “there was no order but for the great maps of art that showed judgement, piety and sacrifice” (Ondaatje 1992, 70). As the soldiers ford rivers below demolished bridges, Kip fantasizes himself into the fresco role of King Solomon, imagining the river’s mud is the warmth of “Queen Sheba’s face, the texture of her skin” and thinking of her as “[t]his woman who would one day know the sacredness of bridges” (70).

As a defuser of bombs and land mines, Kip inhabits a perceptual world of preemptive time and ever-present virtual explosions. We’re told, “He was unable to look at a room or field without seeing the possibility of weapons there” (Ondaatje 1992, 75). Yet although his world becomes a garden of flaring bombs, his life is also informed by a strangely technicized form of practice. Defusing bombs entails a kind of secular attunement. An intricately wired being, Kip performs his work with radio earphones on because the “distraction of music helped him towards clear thought, to the possible forms of structure in the mine, to the personality that had laid the city of threads and then poured the wet concrete over it.... He stopped his focus only when the music slipped off the wavelength and he had to realign the station, bringing clarity back to the swinging tunes” (99). Faced early in his career with a dangerously tricky bomb, Kip perceives it in Borgesian terms as a “maze of wires” (193) and finds “his awareness swelled to all bombs of this variety across the city of London,” meaning that “He had suddenly a map of responsibility, something, he realized, that [his mentor] Lord Suffolk carried within his character at all times. It was this awareness that later created the need in him to block so much out when he was working on a bomb. He was one of those never interested in the choreography of power” (195).

We see a struggle over the sacred and a battle of apparatuses in Kip: he wants to restore a sacred bridge that will transmit renaissance human character back to the humans of World War II, but he must wire himself up with American radio music to block out geopolitics and to behold the “maze of wires” of the bomb before him as the creation of another human being, someone posing a riddle with its structure. Kip’s mission is possible only if he can conceive of it as a bridge to the profane—that is, as a restoration of common human transmission—even if this space must be held open by radio transmission, a radical distraction that blocks the subject-depleting apparatuses of power and enables temporary contemplation.

We see this same merging of the human, the technological, the spiritual, and the geopolitical in Mahajan’s 2016 novel *The Association of Small Bombs*. The novel opens with “Chapter 0,” which depicts the novel’s ground zero, the actual historical event of the 1996 bombing by Kashmiri terrorists of a Delhi marketplace and the fictional deaths of two children there. Tracking the fates of those bereft and surviving—

the boys' friend Mansoor, the dead boys' parents, and Mansoor's parents—the book portrays their lives as forever associated with this incident, to the point of merging “human” and “bomb” and opening up space for radical meditations on time. The dead boys' grieving father, for example, blames himself for never having moved his family out of Delhi, and his inner dialogue leads him right to geopolitics: “Since the day of the blast, he'd been consumed by such what-ifs.... Every way he turned, his past was detonated, revealing tunnels and alternative routes under the packed, settled earth of the present. For every decision there were a million others he could have made. For every India, a Pakistan of possibilities” (Mahajan 2016, 70). Not only does the bombing occur as a result of the Kashmir conflict, but the line between the dead boys' family and the survivor Mansoor's separates the latter family off as a Muslim minority, despite both families' best liberal intentions. Thus, this reference to India's 1947 partition and its ongoing fallout is all too relevant.

But equally historically fateful for Mansoor is that his young adult years as a bomb survivor occur in the same decade as the rise of information technology. While he manages his trauma by taking refuge in his new computer and advancing in computer studies, he unwittingly reinforces nerve damage to his body. Informed by a doctor that he will never be able to type, Mansoor inwardly rages:

Do something else? But there was nothing else for his generation to do! They were hooked to machines. Everywhere one turned one encountered screens, keyboards, wires. And once again Mansoor experienced the bitterness he'd felt when the physiotherapist in the US had told him he was suffering the consequences not just of the bomb but of years of mishandling his computer.... And now, after I've destroyed everything, they tell me? That's the meaning of having survived the bomb. I didn't survive at all. (Mahajan 2016, 160)

Even more ironically, it is this constant pain that leads Mansoor to prayer and a dubious association with the misguided activist Ayub, himself a scooter accident victim formerly afflicted with chronic back pain. Arguing that longstanding pain is actually psychological and can be addressed only with prayer, Ayub recounts his futile experiments with spiritual healing modalities: “I tried everything: Reiki, yoga, yunani, ayurveda, homeopathy. You think of it and I tried it” (156–57). Mansoor does find temporary relief in prayer, but it is portrayed more as a form of mind-narrowing piety than a mindfulness practice. His pain abating, Mansoor follows more of Ayub's dictums, including his exhortation to “Look at the present and pray.... If you look backwards or forward, you stumble. But prayer keeps you focused on the

eternal present” (167). This presentism again ironically leads Mansoor back to where he started, the bomb, but via a sexually disciplining mode of mindfulness, one he imagines as integral to his identity as a “mild person, brought up with firm good Muslim values” (170). We're told:

The more he realized the connection between the mind and the body, the more he wished to keep his mind clean. If you had horrible thoughts, if you carried rage against your parents and sexual fury against women in your head, as he had—how could you be healthy, happy? Your body imploded. You became the bomb. (Mahajan 2016, 170)

This configuration takes a final dystopian turn when pent-up political frustration and sexual fury causes Ayub to join the Kashmiri terrorists and Mansoor to be imprisoned due to his association with Ayub. When Mansoor is finally returned to his family, he has become a conclusively separated being, ending the novel by refusing a social outing and, we're informed in the book's last words, “never [going] out again” (276).

In all three of these texts, we get a glimpse of a practice only for it to be subsumed in a story of worldly apparatuses, depicted as winches, then wires, and then separations. This is most striking in Kip's case when his form of attunement is invaded by wartime atrocity, as his earphones inform him of the US bombing of Japan, thus giving the lie to Western humanism or revealing it to have hidden a delayed detonation mechanism all along. Yet Ondaatje retains a final investment in energetic connectivity via synchronicity. Years later, when Kip's former lover Hana in Canada grazes a cupboard and dislodges a glass, Kip in India knows to reach out his hand, catching the fork dropped by his daughter. Placing two accidents in parallel, Ondaatje's ending suggests an extension of Baboo's idea and a thought to close with: in the form of the untimely geopolitical South Asian Anglophone novel, it isn't actually that mission subsumes transmission or that a mindfulness practice, in the all-encompassing world of the apparatus, is missing; it's that destruction is being harnessed to transmit the idea of a practice that will come somehow after.

NOTE

- 1 Passages from Uzma Aslam Khan's *Trepassing* (2003, 225, 373) and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997, 33, 167–168) provide relevant examples in addition to the ones I will explore in this paper.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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