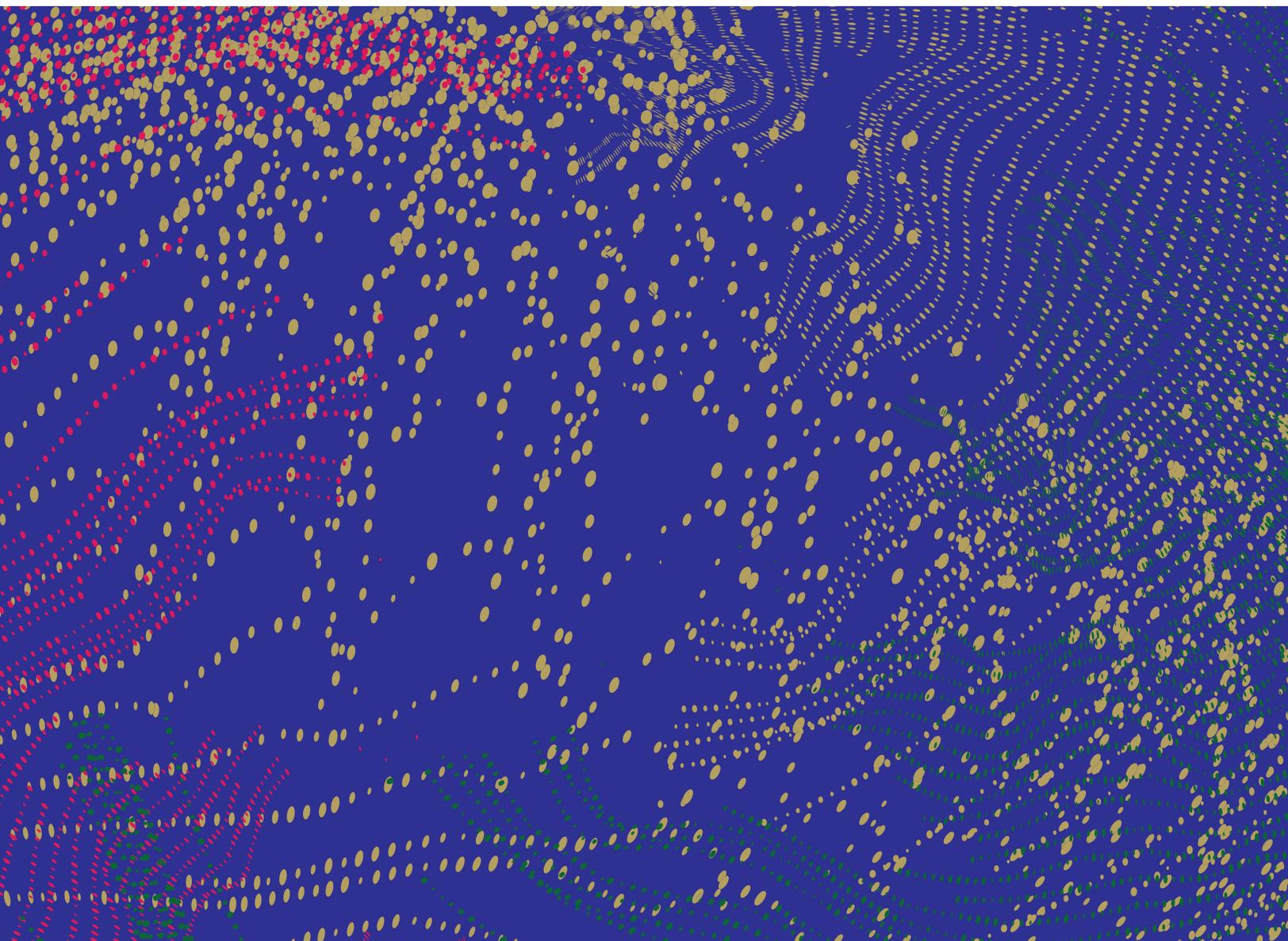


The World Humanities Report
**Humanities Practices and
Voices at the Margins:
National Consciousness
and the Crisis of Belonging
in Indian Anglophone
Muslim Novels**

Mosarrap Hossain Khan



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Humanities Practices and Voices at the Margins: National Consciousness and the Crisis of Belonging in Indian Anglophone Muslim Novels

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How are the humanities practiced in India, where an overemphasis on science and technology has stifled the humanities as a discipline, unlike the forked culture of science and humanities C. P. Snow wrote about in the UK?¹ Since Indian academia has been lukewarm in its response to the humanities in general, what scope do the humanities have for public engagement? The humanities are nonetheless crucial, because, as Alok Rai contends, it is “in the humanities alone that the implicit shapes of our possible futures can be conceived of and thought about, it is here that our nation can awake to self-consciousness.”² It is not necessary that this awakening to self-consciousness may be achieved entirely within the domain of academic institutions as the practices of the humanities exceed academia and reach a wider public domain. However, in both cases, the ultimate purpose of the practices of the humanities ought to be, as Martha Nussbaum writes, “dispelling barriers of hatred and ignorance that divide people the world over by class, caste, race, sex, and religion.”³

In an India riven along the lines of religion, caste, gender, and language, a critical practice in the humanities must consist of engaging with the self-representation of minorities conceived in the broadest sense. Indian Muslim literary production—the novel form, in this essay—and its consumption both inside academia and in the wider public domain is one of the ways that the humanities are practiced or ought to be practiced as the self-expression of a minority community at the margins of the nation-space. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s formulation of “minor literature” as a literature that a “minority

¹ C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures* (1959; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

² Alok Rai, “Humanities: Who Needs Them Anyway?,” *Social Scientist* 17, no. 9/10 (1989): 39–48.

³ Martha Nussbaum, “Humanities and Human Development,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 36, no. 3 (2002): 39–49.

makes in a major language,”⁴ this essay analyzes Indian Anglophone Muslim novels to demonstrate the Muslim crisis of national belonging since the growth of Hindu right-wing politics since in the 1980s, embodied in critical events such as the demolition of Babri Mosque (1992) and the Gujarat Riots (2002).⁵ This essay further demonstrates how Indian Anglophone Muslim novels aim for a collective understanding of social, cultural, and political crisis while focalizing the events through individual subjective consciousness.

The first part of the essay explores the practice of humanities enunciated through processes of writing and reading literature and novels. The second part of the essay theorizes Indian Anglophone Muslim novels as minor literature, that is, as fiction written by Muslim writers with an inward-looking consciousness, as a representation from within. Then I analyze the crisis of secular subjectivity in Indian Anglophone Muslim novels since the 1980s in six important novels: Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981), Shama Futehally’s *Reaching Bombay Central* (2002), Mariam Karim’s *My Little Boat* (2003), Altaf Tyrewala’s *No God in Sight* (2005), Anees Salim’s *Vanity Bagh* (2013), and Andaleeb Wajid’s *My Brother’s Wedding* (2013). The essay then concludes by proposing that the writing and reading of Indian Anglophone Muslim novels constitute an important practice of the humanities that expands the narrative imagination of readers and is crucial for a meaningful civic engagement with fellow Muslim citizens.

Fiction and the Practice of the Humanities

The disciplines of the humanities in India have been marked by a Western episteme. In contrast to the humanistic learning of the precolonial experimental

⁴ Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Robert Brinkley, “What Is a Minor Literature?,” *Mississippi Review* 11, no. 3 (1983): 13–33.

⁵ Babri Mosque was allegedly built by the Mughal general Mir Baqi in the sixteenth century at a site that Hindus claim to be the birthplace of Lord Ram. Vishwa Hindu Parishad and other affiliated right-wing Hindu organizations demolished it on December 6, 1992, in an attempt to right the historical wrongs supposedly perpetrated by Muslim rulers in India. Sectarian riots across India followed the demolition of the mosque. The Gujarat Riots in the Indian state of Gujarat took place after fifty-eight Hindu pilgrims were burnt alive in a train in February 2002. More than a thousand people, most of them Muslims, lost their lives in the riots.

university system at Taxila and Nalanda,⁶ the humanities have been disconnected from the lifeworld and experience of most Indians. Mediated by disciplinary requirements imported from the West, the colonial education system disavowed what Vivek Dhareshwar calls “reflection on experience” and has insulated us from self-knowledge or awareness of our immediate cultural context.⁷ In this essay, I draw a distinction between the humanities as a disciplinary practice and the humanities as a way of reflecting on experience. The task of the humanities inside and outside academia must be an attempt to retrieve, as Dhareshwar writes, those spaces of learning that can reconnect us with our cultural ethos. In this attempt, the novel form plays a crucial role in realigning our experience with the cultural world it represents.

The aggregation of the disciplines of humanities in the West is around a hundred years old, having originated in the United States in the early twentieth century as “a sort of secular glue to hold together the disparate components of a higher education system assembled from elements of German research universities, Oxbridge tutelage, and French training for civil service.”⁸ The post–World War II environment hastened the growth of universities and humanities departments in the United States because of an increasing desire to make sense of a chaotic world that had plunged into violence and moral crisis. The role of the humanities as an enabler of human imagination and critical thinking has persisted in American academia and informs liberal education in other parts of the world. As the world has become more complex in its demographic composition, ideological orientation, religious confrontation, and resistance to gender conformity, among other markers of difference, the role of humanistic education for building a more just and humane society has been advocated by philosophers, educationists, and concerned citizens. In *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (1997), philosopher Martha Nussbaum writes about the role of liberal education in expanding one’s “narrative imagination” in order to be able to imagine oneself in the position of someone different

⁶ Nalanda University was founded in 427 CE and survived till 1127 CE. The university was primarily devoted to Buddhist studies, but it also taught fine arts, politics, mathematics, astronomy, and the art of war. The university was revived in 2014 through a collaboration between India and several Southeast Asian countries and currently offers courses in Buddhist studies and other subjects in the humanities and social sciences. Taxila University was founded in the fifth century BCE at Taxila, in what is now Pakistan. It was a prominent center of Buddhist learning and imparted lessons in the Vedas, law, medicine, and military science. Both universities attracted scholars from around the ancient world.

⁷ See Vivek Dhareshwar, “Sites of Learning and Intellectual Parasitism: The Case for New Humanities,” in *Critical Humanities from India: Contexts, Issues, Futures*, ed. D. Venkat Rao (New Delhi: Routledge, 2018), 86.

⁸ Edward L. Ayers, “Where the Humanities Live,” *Daedalus* 138, no. 1 (2009): 25.

by making meaning of that person's story, as when we read a novel or hear a story. Further, Nussbaum writes that such a narrative imagination or understanding of another person's story or situation is not purely uncritical, as human beings bring their own judgment while encountering the other. However, any responsible act of judgment must consider understanding the world from the perspective of the other in the context of their history and social world.⁹

According to Nussbaum, narrative imagination is a preparation for moral interaction, an act of compassionate imagining of the other by putting oneself

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in their position. Reading literature and fiction enables an imaginative engagement with the other in the way “literary imagining both inspires intense concern with the fate of characters and defines those characters as containing a rich inner life, not all of which

is open to view; in the process, the reader learns to have respect for the hidden contents of that inner world, seeing its importance in defining a creature as fully human.”¹⁰ This echoes Lionel Trilling's notion that the imagination of the novel reader is a “liberal imagination” that respects the social or material world of the characters the reader encounters in the course of reading a novel.¹¹ The moral education and the values of compassion and recognition that literature propagates make it imperative that the novel—a literary form that emerged during the founding moment of democracy in the West—be read to expand our imaginative capacities for understanding the motives and actions of others. More so, such a compassionate understanding is required to “give voice to the experiences of groups in our society that we urgently need to understand, such as members of other cultures, ethnic and racial minorities, women, and lesbians and gay men.”¹²

Long before Nussbaum's formulation of narrative imagination, Monroe C. Beardsley wrote that fiction tells us about the range of human behavior with different traits. Reading a novel, then, is an act of encountering others or encountering some form of ourselves. The novelist “shows us what looks

⁹ Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 10–11.

¹⁰ Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, 90.

¹¹ Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: Viking Press, 1950).

¹² Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, 99–100.

like a possibility: a psychologically feasible combination of traits and actions. But he also shows us possible explanations of those actions.”¹³ Fiction helps broaden our horizon by dispelling our narrowness and imagining mental states other than what we have encountered, “the cognitive point of view,” the ability to comprehend “hurts we have never suffered, terrors that have no parallel in our own protected lives.”¹⁴ Fiction or literature in general, as Michael Wood writes, “results in the activation of personal knowledge: knowledge of others and ourselves; knowledge of stubborn, slippery, or forgotten facts; knowledge of old and new possibilities.”¹⁵ Such a humanistic critical inquiry requires that “we explicitly acknowledge our own personal bias and emotional investment when reading a text, listening to music, looking at art, or addressing a problem.”¹⁶

So far, I have discussed the practice of the humanities as a discipline within the university. However, what would a public practice of the humanities look like? In Kathleen Woodward’s estimation, culture has become dominated by screens over the last hundred years, yet book clubs abound, and books are still read with interest.¹⁷ Woodward considers two public humanities projects: Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History, directed by James Gregory, a professor of history at the University of Washington, which began as an undergraduate teaching experiment and then encouraged history majors to publish online their best research on the interconnected histories of racial and labor justice in Seattle; and the Great Wall of Los Angeles, a project in the Tujunga Wash Flood Control Channel, conceived by the artist Judy Baca, which represents the history of ethnic people in California and acts as a testament to racial harmony. Woodward posits that both projects expand our affective understanding of other people from marginalized communities. Gerald Early’s suggestion, drawn from American humanities departments in the 1960s, is useful in understanding the osmosis between academia and the outside world that can engender a radical politics: “[The] activist group of young people, mainly (though not exclusively) middle class as a result of rising postwar American prosperity ... imported the practice of social change from the outside in, and then brought ideas from the

¹³ Monroe C. Beardsley, “The Humanities and Human Understanding,” in *The Humanities and the Understanding of Reality*, ed. Thomas B. Stroup (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1966), 26.

¹⁴ Beardsley, “The Humanities,” 28, 27.

¹⁵ Michael Wood, “A World without Literature,” *Daedalus* 138, no. 1 (2009): 62.

¹⁶ Richard J. Franke, “The Power of the Humanities & a Challenge to Humanists,” *Daedalus* 138, no. 1 (2009): 17.

¹⁷ Kathleen Woodward, “The Future of the Humanities—in the Present & in Public,” *Daedalus* 138, no. 1 (2009): 110–23.

academy back to their social and political movements.”¹⁸ The students who took part in the civil rights movement and other such movements intensified what they had learned in their liberal arts classrooms, making higher education reflect the reality that existed outside and making society reflect the ideals of academia. The students were inspired to think of liberalism as a “moral necessity” in order to engage with human emotions and spiritual values through “imagination, deliberation, and critical thinking.”¹⁹ Such a public engagement must ensure that the humanities “put themselves in play, at risk, in the world. They must find ways to combine their traditional strengths, tried and even strengthened by decades of trial, with new opportunities.”²⁰

This proposition is difficult in a country such as India, where the humanities disciplines have occupied a marginal place in academia, a legacy of the colonial British utilitarian university education system. The practice of public humanities is even more difficult, notwithstanding the ideas contained in the government of India’s National Education Policy 2020, which envisages a restructuring of liberal arts education in the form of students’ engagement with the larger community.²¹ Engagement with contemporary political movements has taken place in some of the leading Indian universities, such as Jawaharlal University, the University of Hyderabad, Delhi University, and Jadavpur University, to name a few, that are heavily invested in liberal arts education. The recent protests that erupted in 2020 against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) demonstrate how liberal arts education has enabled students to uphold the secular values enshrined in the Indian constitution. By foregrounding liberty and inclusive citizenship, these student movements oppose the divisive Hindutva ideology of the ruling dispensation.

Nevertheless, a critical humanities practice is much needed in India both within and outside academia in order to expand citizens’ narrative imagination around Muslim experience. Novels by Muslim writers are a potential site for engaging with the lives of a marginalized community that is often misunderstood because of a lack of engagement with their ways of life. Such a practice of the humanities could help push back against the jingoistic nationalism and religious chauvinism of the present Hindu nationalist government in India.

¹⁸ Gerald Early, “The Humanities & Social Change,” *Daedalus* 138, no. 1 (2009): 55.

¹⁹ Early, “The Humanities and Social Change,” 55; Franke, “The Power of the Humanities,” 23.

²⁰ Ayers, “Where the Humanities Live,” 34.

²¹ Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, National Education Policy 2020, accessed August 21, 2021, https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf.

Indian Anglophone Muslim Novels as Minor Literature

Indian Muslims have had a subaltern existence in postcolonial India because of the partition of the country in 1947. With the creation of Pakistan as an independent Islamic state, Indian Muslims' allegiance to India became suspect, as historian Gyanendra Pandey has demonstrated, in the immediate aftermath of the division of the country.²² Their marginal existence and tenuous citizenship have been further complicated since the 1980s with the rise of Hindu right-wing forces that seek to delegitimize Muslim claims to Indian citizenship. In 2019 the government of India introduced an amendment to the Citizenship Act of 1955 that proposed to give citizenship to the persecuted minorities in India's neighboring countries, except to Muslims in those countries. In the guise of magnanimity toward persecuted minorities, the amendment sought to exclude Muslims from seeking citizenship on the basis of their religion. The home minister of India, Amit Shah, further announced that a National Register of Citizens (NRC) would be implemented—the NRC has been, in fact, undertaken so far only in the Indian state of Assam—to weed out illegal immigrants in India. The amendment, along with the NRC, was seen to reiterate the liminality of Indian Muslims in the nation-space.

Indian Anglophone Muslim novelists have been depicting the Muslim cultural experience in their writing within this fraught landscape. I have chosen to focus here on Indian Anglophone Muslim novels, despite the presence of a tradition of Muslim writing in Urdu and other languages, because of their wide availability and the way they have carved out a minor tradition, mirroring their condition within the nation-space. While operating in a putative secular social landscape, Indian Anglophone Muslim novels occupy a “minor” position within the largely secularized canon of Indian Anglophone fiction.²³ As Urdu literature did just before independence, Indian Anglophone Muslim

As Urdu literature did just before independence, Indian Anglophone Muslim fiction features secularized subjects and their anxiety about belonging to the secular nation-space.

²² Gyanendra Pandey, “Can a Muslim Be an Indian?,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41, no. 4 (1999): 608–29.

²³ This echoes the “minor” position of Urdu short stories during the Indian nationalist movement. Despite staging a secular social vision, Urdu language and literature came to be associated with “minority” Muslims, and the Urdu short story came to occupy a minor position in the Indian literary tradition. See Aamir Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony: Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 180–85.

fiction features secularized subjects and their anxiety about belonging to the secular nation-space. Indian Anglophone Muslim novels fall into two broad categories, temporally and thematically: those that are set against the backdrop of the impending partition of India and those that deal with other momentous events such as the demolition of the Babri Mosque. In both cases, Indian Muslim life is studied and interpreted through the prism of communalism, as if Indian Muslim life is thought to be worthy of inquiry only when it becomes either an object of violence or the subjective instigator of violence. The first category of novels places Muslim characters amid the decay and extinction of an older way of life and the fictional aesthetic conveys a tone of melancholy, loss, and nostalgia. In contrast, the second category of novels depicts the crisis of minority engagement with a secular state that produces anxiety among Muslims seeking a sense of belonging to the nation at violent moments of communal clash.

Following Amin Malak, I understand Muslim novels as that assemblage of literary texts that represent “the culture and civilization of Islam from *within*.”²⁴ Almost all the writers I have chosen to analyze here share a tangential relationship to Islam and identify as secular Muslims, even more so in the aftermath of 9/11 amid growing Islamophobia. Thus, in my categorization of Muslim novels, the word “Muslim” denotes writers who think of themselves as Muslims, whether practicing or not. These novels are unlike Graham Greene’s “Christian fiction,” in that they do not primarily focus on Islamic motifs such as revelation and piety (like Christian motifs of redemption in Greene’s fiction). For this reason, I avoid using the term “Islamic fiction,” which explicitly draws on aspects of faith and belief. Rather, Muslim novels represent a habitus imbued with cultural values derived from Islam, operating as a discursive tradition in which power, authority, and material factors determine the moods and motivations of the actors. In contrast to what I call Muslim novels, another group of novelists such as Leila Aboulela, Randa Abdel-Fattah, Mohja Kahf, and others have created a new fictional genre of psychological realism, termed by Ferial Ghazoul as “Halal Fiction,” which demonstrates “a narrative logic where faith and rituals become moving modes of living.”²⁵ This genre of fiction is marked by a commitment to the spiritual, emotional, and moral values of Islam.²⁶ Ironically, such fiction

²⁴ Amin Malak, *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 2 (emphasis in the original).

²⁵ See Leila Aboulela, *The Translator* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1999) and *Minaret* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005); Randa Abdel-Fattah, *Does My Head Look Big in This?* (New York: Orchard Books, 2005); and Mohja Kahf, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2006). See also Ferial Ghazoul, “Halal Fiction,” *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, July 12–18, 2001.

²⁶ Firouzeh Ameri, “Veiled Experiences: Re-writing Women’s Identities and Experiences in Contemporary Muslim Fiction in English” (PhD diss., Murdoch University, 2012).

emerged as a reaction against Islamophobia in the West and as a form of protest against the works of supposedly “blasphemous” writers such as Rushdie.²⁷ In an interview with Malavika Vettath, Aboulela reiterated her faith-based vision of Anglophone fiction: “My ambition is to put practising Muslims in English literary fiction, to write novels that are infused with Muslim aesthetics in the same way that many of the western classics were formed by a Christian ethos.”²⁸ This echoes Ghazoul’s observation that Aboulela’s fiction does not espouse empty religious rituals or dogma; instead, it focuses on the need to grasp the essence of religious experience as a code of ethical behavior. However, in this essay, I focus on Anglophone Muslim novels from India that concern themselves with the crisis of national belonging for secularized fictional subjects.

I interpret Indian Anglophone Muslim novels as minor literature because of the way they engage with the political and collective consciousness of their subjects. In Deleuze and Guattari’s conception, based on an analysis of Kafka’s writings, minor literature consists of three elements: “the deterritorialization of the language, the connection of the individual and the political, [and] the collective arrangement of utterance.... ‘[M]inor’ no longer characterizes certain literatures, but describes the revolutionary conditions of any literature within what we call the great (or established).”²⁹ Let me address each of these three elements. First, because of its colonial legacy, English is a deterritorialized language in India, and Muslim writers further loosened it from its immediate majoritarian cultural space. Second, in minor literature, the concern of the individual is often connected to larger national concerns, unlike the bourgeois Oedipal concerns in someone like Goethe and his *bildungsroman* (a novel of formation). In the case of Indian Anglophone Muslim novels, narratives of formation are often aborted attempts, as the nation-space does not offer conditions suitable for the growth and development of individual Muslim subjects. Although Fredric Jameson has termed all Third World literatures as “national allegories” (e.g., Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*), Indian Anglophone Muslim novelists’ collective engagement with the nation is often tentative and unfulfilled.³⁰ Third, minor literature concerns itself with “the collective arrangement of utterance”: “Precisely because talents do not abound in a minor literature, the conditions are not given for an individuated utterance which would be that of some ‘master’ and

²⁷ On the reaction against Islamophobia, see Wail S. Hassan, “Leila Aboulela and the Ideology of Muslim Immigrant Fiction,” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 41, no. 2/3 (2008): 298–319.

²⁸ Malavika Vettath, “Dreaming of a Lost Future,” *The National*, November 5, 2013, <https://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/books/dreaming-of-a-lost-future-1.329503>.

²⁹ Deleuze, Guattari, and Brinkley, “What Is a Minor Literature?,” 18.

³⁰ Fredric Jameson, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” *Social Text* 15 (Autumn 1986): 65–88.

could be separated from collective utterance.”³¹ Among Indian Anglophone Muslim novels there is no notion of individual genius, and in the rare case of a Salman Rushdie, the utterance of the individual author is always connected to or seen as a reflection of the larger collective experience.

The Dystopic Terrain of Indian Anglophone Muslim Novels

Indian Anglophone Muslim novels offer a reflection on the Muslim experience by delving into the cultural life of a community that is placed at the margins of the nation-space. In this section, the essay explores the dystopic terrain of Indian Muslim novels through six examples that demonstrate how this minor literature concerns itself with the crisis of secular subjectivity in the larger sociopolitical and collective realm.

Although Salman Rushdie does not write from a rooted Indian experience because he has lived most of his life outside India, his *Midnight's Children*, set in India between 1915 and 1977, changed the landscape of Indian Anglophone novels and brought them much greater international recognition.³² The publication of *Midnight's Children* in 1981 generated considerable interest, with the *New York Times* characterizing it as a book in which “a continent find[s] its voice.”³³ The novel has also been described as “the paradigmatic postcolonial text subverting the notions of received historiography and indigenizing both the language and the narrative mode of the colonizing culture.”³⁴ Rushdie has been called the quintessential “cosmopolitan” who informs the metropolitan center in the West about the provincial East.³⁵ His ability to portray the whole of India is credited to his use of English, which “at once separates him irrevocably from India, and makes the whole of India available to him.”³⁶ He is said to have maintained a balance between the inside and the outside, between provincial nationalism and cosmopolitanism.³⁷

³¹ Deleuze, Guattari, and Brinkley, “What Is a Minor Literature?,” 17.

³² Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (1981; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 2013). Hereafter cited in the text as *MC*.

³³ Clarke Blaise, “A Novel of India's Coming of Age,” *New York Times*, April 19, 1981, <http://movies2.nytimes.com/books/98/12/06/specials/rushdie-children.html>.

³⁴ Meenakshi Mukherjee, ed., *Rushdie's "Midnight's Children": A Book of Readings* (New Delhi: Pencraft, 1999), 9.

³⁵ Timothy Brennan, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), viii.

³⁶ Richard Cronin, *Imagining India* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989).

³⁷ Neil ten Kortenaar, *Self, Nation, Text in Salman Rushdie's "Midnight's Children"* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), 13.

Midnight's Children starts in a dramatic fashion, intertwining the personal history of baby Saleem Sinai with India's national history.³⁸ The evocation of the precise date of August 15, 1947, and the time of midnight leaves no doubt about Rushdie's intention of weaving an individual's destiny with the destiny of the nation: "I was born ... on August 15th, 1947. And the time? The time matters, too. Well then: at night. No, it's important to be more precise.... On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact" (MC, 3). Rushdie's narrative strengthens this national allegory by drawing on the resources of the postmodern assumption of the multiplicity of history. In fact, one of Rushdie's major preoccupations in *Midnight's Children* is how precisely to fragment the narrative of the nation so as to represent the plurality and multiplicity of the nation-space instead of constructing a grand narrative in the fashion of official histories of the nation.

In recounting the postcolonial history of the Indian nation, *Midnight's Children* challenges conventional historiographical practices of nationalist-official and Marxist historians by locating human agency in a discontinuous manner. The narrator, Saleem, of Christian and lower-caste Hindu ancestry, exchanged at birth and brought up by Muslim parents, complicates fixed communal identities. In 1942, the year Mahatma Gandhi launched the Quit India Movement with the intention of driving the colonial British administration out of India, Saleem's grandfather Aadam Aziz, a university doctor in Agra, "contracted a highly dangerous form of optimism" (MC, 45). This optimism was a result of his closeness to Mian Abdullah, the leader of the Free Islam Convocation, an organization that opposed the Muslim League and sought to bring together "members of agrarian movements, urban labourers' syndicates, religious divines and religious groupings" in the dusty city of Agra in the summer of 1942 (MC, 56). Aziz's optimism for a united secular India is thwarted with the assassination of Abdullah before the convocation could begin, which prefigures the crisis of engagement with the Indian secular state during the partition of the country in 1947. The Muslim optimism for a secular India is further disrupted by the activities of Hindu right-wing groups that target Muslim properties in 1947 in a bid to scare Muslims off to Pakistan. A Hindu group sets fire to the industrial estate where Saleem's father, Ahmed Sinai, stores the stock of his leather-cloth business, forcing him to escape from Delhi to Bombay. After Ahmed Sinai engages in shady deals with government officials in order to get his land reclamation business in Mumbai going, his properties are frozen by the government on charges of corruption. Dr. Narlikar, Ahmed Sinai's friend and business partner, explains

³⁸ Aijaz Ahmad, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory,'" *Social Text* 17 (1987): 3-25.

the surreptitious majoritarian bias of a supposedly secular state: “These are bad times, Sinai Bhai—freeze a Muslim’s assets, they say, and you make him run to Pakistan, leaving all his wealth behind him. Catch the lizard’s tail and he’ll snap it off! This so-called secular state gets some damn clever ideas” (*MC*, 85).

The novel is constructed dialectically over the competing demands of an overtly secular state and a subterranean religious longing among the populace, which takes ominous forms at certain moments, creating a crisis of minority engagement with the state. The mythical idea of India that the founders of the nation had envisioned turns out to be a fantasy, as Rushdie writes, “which would periodically need the sanctification and renewal which can only be provided by rituals of blood” (*MC*, 150). Saleem’s rhetorical question, “One empty jar ... how to end?” anticipates some of the crucial events of the 1990s that render Indian Muslims’ engagement with the nation more tenuous (*MC*, 461). The demolition of Babri Mosque in 1992 led to communal violence that swept through large parts of India. The subsequent ascendance to power of the right-wing Bhartiya Janata Party government could be described as resentment nationalism, an overt masculine turn in Indian nationalism. But more importantly, these events indicate a deep suspicion of other cultures and civilizations and subvert the very idea of a plural and accommodative society conceived during the nationalist movement. Although Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* ends in 1977, it prefigures the crucial history of the 1990s, which would further engender a Muslim crisis of belonging to the nation.

Set two months after the Bombay Riots, which followed the demolition of the Babri Mosque in December 1992, Shama Futehally’s *Reaching Bombay Central*, like Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, narrates a tenuous sense of Muslim belonging to the nation at certain critical moments of the nation’s history.³⁹ However, unlike Rushdie’s novel, gender is central to Futehally’s novel as it explores the interconnections among gender, class, religion, and the nation, and between the private and the public, in order to demonstrate the complex modalities of power that are operative both within the family and in the body politic of the nation. In the mode of psychological realism, Futehally’s novel delves into the stream of protagonist Ayesha Jamal’s thoughts as she ponders over her civil servant husband Aarif Jamal’s suspension from his job and possible jail term for showing favor to a Muslim man, Hamid, at the request of a Hindu friend, Shiv Prasad Nath. Hamid disposes of the alcohol license that he obtains for industrial purposes in a “benami sale” (anonymous sale), drawing the attention of Aarif’s bosses

³⁹ Shama Futehally, *Reaching Bombay Central* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2004). Hereafter cited in the text as *RBC*.

and necessitating a departmental inquiry against him. The narrative unfolds in a flashback of Ayesha's journey from Delhi to Bombay in a train, a symbol of India's cosmopolitan culture, to request a favor to save her husband. The novel foregrounds the subtle gendered power relations between Ayesha, a compliant wife, and her husband, Aarif, a Muslim man holding a position of power in the Indian bureaucracy, as well as between Aarif and the powerful and predominantly Hindu bureaucratic establishment.

As is the case with minor literature, these novels aspire to a collective cartography of Muslim cultural experience that necessitates a negotiation between religious commitments and worldly desires.

In this dual power struggle, the novel demonstrates how “domestic ‘private’ relationships are politicized by being juxtaposed with other structures of power.”⁴⁰ Ayesha feels clumsy revealing her Muslim name to a fellow traveler, a politician who tries to reassure her by saying, “I also have ... many Muslim friends” (*RBC*, 5). Names and naming often take ominous turns and become markers of exclusion in a communally polarized country like India. Her first discomfort at revealing her name and the politician's attempt to recognize her for who she is evoke the everyday anxiety of minorities. The novel moves between her present journey and her husband's plight following the scandal of favor-mongering for another Muslim man. This innocuous favor takes on political color as the minister under whom Aarif works, Navinbhai, orders an enquiry into the supposed dictates of the Sangha, the Hindu nationalist organization responsible for the demolition of the Babri Mosque: “Navinbhai was a Minister who, as the election approached, was keeping his options open with the Sangha. He was keeping them extremely open; and it was clear that if he had the opportunity to make an example of one Aarif Jamal, entirely in the course of duty, it would not be thrown away” (*RBC*, 47).

Aarif himself thinks that a case has been made out against him because of the current political climate, which wants a Muslim scapegoat, yet when his Muslim lawyer suggests the same, Aarif calls out his lawyer for his prejudiced way of thinking. Futehally's skillful delving into the psyche of an educated Muslim professional illustrates the dilemma of many Indian Muslims who walk a fine line between professional competence and accusations of communalism

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Jackson, “Gender and Communal Politics in Shama Futehally's *Reaching Bombay Central*,” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 46, no. 3 (2011): 479.

in an altered context of aggressive Hindu nationalist politics. The multireligious and inclusive space of the train compartment is contrasted with the bigotry of narrow religious politics on election day: “And as they hurried past (because Aarif was still parking the car), the young men at the stall stopped her with easy good humor.... She had to tell them her name (when would Aarif come?) and it came out nervously, although she hated, she despised herself, for that nervousness. And as she pronounced the word ‘Jamal,’ one of the young men glanced at the others. That was all” (*RBC*, 120).

Ayesha’s sense of alienation attains a heightened sensitivity at the voting booth, as if she has descended into a dark well: “This was what the Sangha did to you; it made you spiral downwards and end up in a small dark place where you were all alone” (*RBC*, 122). Yet the novel presents the train as a microcosm of inclusiveness where intersubjective relations compensate for the loss of trust between communities. As she sobs away in the train compartment, thinking of her husband’s bleak future, another traveler, Jayashree, a Hindu girl, thrusts a wet handkerchief into Ayesha’s hand so that she can wipe away her tears. The juxtaposition of the train as a secular-liberal space vis-à-vis the fractured national space deepens a sense of despair for the minority community. The train takes on the shape of a rational public sphere where citizens can express their differing viewpoints without fear. As Marian Aguiar writes, “Postcolonial representations of the Indian railway frequently present a nation emerging through the process of mobility.”⁴¹ The railway space becomes a means to critique the nation by showing its fault lines. While the train is depicted as an inclusive space, a gulf exists between Jayashree’s secular-liberal understanding of the nation that has taken a wrong turn toward Hindu fundamentalism and Ayesha’s survival as a Muslim in the country: “And how very pleasant it must be, to fear for the nation when you did not have to fear for yourself!” (*RBC*, 119). The author critiques the nonsomatic aspect of secular-liberal thinking in which the fear of death and both physical and psychological annihilation as a visceral feeling are absent. The novel ends on an optimistic note, as the right-wing party is defeated in the elections, providing Ayesha’s husband an opportunity to seek redress under a secular government. Futehally’s novel offers a deep critique of a state bureaucracy nexus that values government servants depending on the dispensation in power while showcasing a facade of liberalism and secularism. A Muslim bureaucrat is an anomaly in this feudal space and an easy scapegoat in moments of communal crisis.

⁴¹ Marian Aguiar, *Tracking Modernity: India’s Railway and the Culture of Mobility* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 118.

Mariam Karim's *My Little Boat*, records the vicissitudes of everyday life in a small town, Rahimganj, near Lucknow.⁴² As Karim notes at the beginning of the novel, the narrative is woven around the symbols of the boat, the river, the water, and the color green, which signifies revelation. She dedicates the book to the Green Prophet, Al-Khizr, Saint of Water and of Immortality and Guide of the Sufis. The fish icon, which adorns protagonist Nasreen's journal in the novel, is the vehicle of Al-Khizr. The reference to the saint Al-Khizr foregrounds the values of tolerance and devotion and a yearning for an earlier time shorn of traumatic social upheavals such as religious animosity and the destruction of religious places. Narrated through the alternating realistic descriptions of ordinary life in Rahimganj and Nasreen's journal entries, in which she reminisces about her mother's time at the University of Oxford as a liberated woman, the novel is written in the form of a dialectic between the micropractices of everyday life and the macrodiscourses of national, religious, and caste identity. As Nasreen's journal entries demonstrate, she longs for her mother and poet Saira Alvi's free life abroad, "when our own lives seem so unlike our own ... [and] our selves so unlike our selves.... [W]e look to others' tales and others' songs to find what resemble us most closely" (*MLB*, 4).

Nasreen's journal, written in a confessional mode, records her growing alienation from her surroundings (including her husband, Javed) against the backdrop of the demolition of the Babri Mosque by Hindu nationalists and the second Pokhran nuclear test, which was conducted in 1998 by the Hindu nationalist government that rose to power following the mosque's demolition. As hyper-masculine nationalism sweeps through the nation, Javed, Nasreen's husband, who runs a newspaper called *The Tabsira* (the word denotes "critical review" in Urdu), propagates secularism and liberalism to save the "Idea of India." Javed's public performance is contrasted with Nasreen's secluded life in a sprawling and decaying feudal home. Javed's family considers Nasreen mad for staying cooped up in her room. A lonely Nasreen, whose daughter has been sent off to a boarding school to be protected from her mother's increasingly strange behavior, writes in her journal, "In life there can be no freedom for us, except madness" (*MLB*, 6). The novel genders the nation by focusing on the patriarchal domestic sphere, where women are engaged in mundane acts of procreation, preparation of food, and upholding religious tradition clad "in black and off-white burqas, veiled by day, in black and white layers of satin, like penguins, moving, ever moving, waddling" like flightless birds (*MLB*, 60).

⁴² Mariam Karim, *My Little Boat* (2003; repr., New Delhi: Vitasta Publishing, 2013). Hereafter cited in the text as *MLB*.

By bringing into dialogue different narratorial voices, the novel confirms the difficulty of adopting a linear narrative for depicting traumatic moments in the life of a nation and in the life of its protagonist, Nasreen, who spent her childhood in Europe and was married off in Rahimganj, defying the progressive trajectory of her mother's career and reflecting the backward progression of Hindu nationalism in India. She takes refuge in her mother's poetry; in art; in the memories of her childhood spent with Zammurad (a Moroccan child adopted by Lise, a Russian woman, in Paris) in Europe; in her supraconsciousness, in which nature and humans live in perfect harmony; and, above all, in the Sufi philosophy of love: "The purpose of all art, Mamma said to me, was to transcend the human condition" (*MLB*, 18). In contrast, Javed focuses on the microhistories of lived experience in the face of propagandist religious discourse as he writes to his daughter, Mehjabeen, on the contemporary resurgence of Hindu nationalism: "But our day to day life has to be conducted at a micro-level, so be careful" (*MLB*, 16). He wonders "how a country nurtured on such cynical wisdom the Panchatantra ... the Mahabharata ... could have spawned generations of such naïve and superstitious people" (*MLB*, 29). Caught in the whirlpool of contemporary communal politics, Javed admonishes himself for "reacting like a minority" and navigates narrow identitarianism through reason and logic (*MLB*, 29).

Toward the end of the novel, Nasreen takes to embroidery and stitches on cushion covers whatever has been troubling her, a therapeutic act for an anguished mind: "When the world gets into you, Apa, it begins to compress your insides, and you have to get it out" (*MLB*, 199–200). In the face of violence and propaganda, Nasreen suggests that one must never lose sight of the larger picture about the meaning of human life even as one negotiates the terrain of everyday life. At the end of the novel, Nasreen takes her little boat to the middle of the Gomti River to liberate her soul from the constrictions of narrow chauvinistic identity, embodying the metaphor of the princess who killed herself by drowning in order to avoid marrying her own brother. Nasreen's death by drowning is a form of resistance to narrow religious ideology, which negates the messiness of mundane life and propagates a rigid identitarian politics. Her daughter Mehjabeen's journey to London and Paris sets the course of Nasreen's aborted life to the teleology of forward movement, which was denied to her by her mother, who in her rebellious life always longed for roots. Karim's novel is a deft exploration of the movement of ideas and people, how history can never be recaptured. The past can at best be glorified and romanticized, but it is a difficult place to inhabit from the vantage point of the present and the future.

Altaf Tyrewala's searing novel *No God in Sight* depicts vignettes of life after the Bombay Riots in late 1992 with a particular focus on Muslims in the city.⁴³ The novel adopts a linear narrative approach in which sparse stories—"the form had to do with writing as little as possible and capturing as much as possible"—of individual lives are strung together after the fashion of the Scheherazade narrative.⁴⁴ When a character leaves after narrating his or her view on the action, another character picks up the thread; thus, each chapter contains the perspective of one character on an incident, thereby producing multiple perspectives on the same events and characters. Commenting on the fractured narrative technique of the novel, Tyrewala says, "The conventional novel wouldn't work when writing about Mumbai, which has so many realities, truths and stories pressing in."⁴⁵ As a writer deeply immersed in the digital culture both professionally and in his personal life, Tyrewala further states, "In a sense, *No God In Sight* is structured like a website, one story hyper-linked to the next, each story containing a world in itself, until things finally come full circle."⁴⁶

The novel opens with a description of Mr. and Mrs. Khwaja's loveless marriage, in which Mrs. Khwaja laments the death of her poetic imagination, abetted by the luxury of "air-conditioned rooms and twenty-four-hour TV" (NGS, 1). Mr. Khwaja, as the head of a dysfunctional family, sets the dystopic tone of the novel right at the beginning: "Twenty-six years ago I married a mediocre poetess. She gave me two kids—a son who spends every waking hour online, and a daughter who's never home" (NGS, 2). While their son, Ubaid, roams "desolate cyber landscapes and chat[s] with disembodied strangers—in search of a home, a heart," their daughter, Minaz, walks "into a hot, unventilated room" at the seedy Shamma Nursing Home with her reluctant twenty-year-old lover, Kasim, to get an abortion (NGS, 3, 6). The Muslim abortionist, Akbar, ironically named after India's greatest Muslim emperor, never speaks to his clients and performs his task mechanically, hoping that someday he will beget his own children, whose "collective cries ... will hopefully drown out the unborn-baby voices in my head" (NGS, 8). Contrasted to the received wisdom of abortion as a godless act, the abortionist views himself as god-fearing: "I can't afford to remain godless for too long. The only way I can hide from myself is by being reli-

⁴³ Altaf Tyrewala, *No God in Sight* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2005). Hereafter cited in the text as NGS.

⁴⁴ Sonia Phalnikar, "Interview with Altaf Tyrewala," Qantara.de, October 26, 2006, <https://en.qantara.de/content/interview-with-altaf-tyrewala-bombay-is-a-city-of-extremes>.

⁴⁵ Phalnikar, "Interview with Altaf Tyrewala."

⁴⁶ Zafar Anjum, "Kitaab Interview with Altaf Tyrewala: Never Think of a Short Story in Isolation," Kitaab.org, September 14, 2014, <https://kitaab.org/2014/09/14/kitaab-interview-with-altaf-tyrewala-never-think-of-a-short-story-in-isolation/>.

gious—or delusional” (NGS, 11). The conflict between religious commitments and worldly desires is starkly embodied in the figure of the abortionist—the savior of confused, directionless, and deluded youngsters. The portrayal of the Khwaja family is intertwined with the larger narrative of India’s descent into chauvinistic Hindu nationalism, which forces its Muslim population to either submit to the violence of a Hindu nation or leave the country, as in the case of Mr. Amin Bootwala, who winds up his inherited business and leaves India with the hope of securing a future for his children in America. Once Mr. Bootwala’s flight takes off from Mumbai, he muses, “I will remember the protection money demanded, the covert and blatant religious slurs, the riots, the aftermaths, the newborn niece named Nidhi, the rewritten history books.... Let them have their Hindustan for Hindus” (NGS, 28).

Tyrewala’s sparse and caustic narrative exposes the hollowness of territorial and ideological Hindu nationalism and Muslims’ tenuous engagement with the nation. This fraught entanglement takes Suleiman, a young tailor from a

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village that drives out the “outsiders,” back to his family history, where his great-grandfather converted to Islam and remained “uncut,” a scandal revealed during the final bath after his death. The poor tailor ends up in Mumbai, where a police encounter triggers insecurity among Muslims,

particularly in a young aspiring lawyer, Sohail Tambawala, who decides to change his name to a Hindu one, Jiten Mehra: “I am so excited I want to go to the Government Press right now and sentence ‘Sohail Tambawala’ to death. How many people know such delight! Or such anguish! To obliterate oneself. To birth a new self. Jiten Mehra would travel around the country freely” (NGS, 128). The novel adroitly weaves a cross section of Muslim lives in the teeming city of Mumbai, which contains within itself multiple cities of the rich, of the poor, of the cooled, of the scorched, of those inhabiting ghettos, of those living on the footpath. The city becomes an anchor to hold all these disparate lives together and produces a godless, sterile, dystopic world in which the only constant among Muslims is the feeling of being excluded and of being persecuted by a resurgent Hindu nationalism, which sees them as “outsiders” or Pakistanis.

As the novel closes, no god comes to the rescue of the young couple, Minaz and Kasim; instead, they encounter only the Muslim abortionist: “I [Kasim] lose my bearings when the man in the striped shirt nods to indicate that he is, in fact, the doctor. That he is, in fact, the nadir of our lives. That he is, in fact, the abortionist” (NGS, 202). In place of God, the abortionist performs the role of a rescuer, and the young couple thinks that this sacrifice of an unborn life will brighten their future. Tyrewala’s layered dark novel is a stark indictment of faith, which can be a source of solace, as Muslims grapple with an insecure future in a resurgent Hindu India.

Anees Salim’s *Vanity Bagh*, winner of the Hindu Prize for Best Fiction in 2013, depicts the complexity of Muslim life in an imaginary Muslim-predominant neighborhood, Vanity Bagh, consisting of “a row of dusty green colonnaded structures with balconies made of wood and the railings of wrought iron” in the town of Mangobagh.⁴⁷ Weaving sessions from a court proceeding handling terrorism charges against a number of Muslim youths with scenes from various Hollywood films, the novel narrates the listless and impoverished life of the inner-city youth—Imran, Zulfikar, Jinnah, Zia, Yahya, and Navaz Sharif—who form a gang called 5½ Men to extort money from local business establishments. The local don, Abu Hathim, becomes their role model. He inspires them to make a quick buck: “We dreamed the dream of the poor—to be rich and, circumstances permitting, famous—and we had an unlikely role model, who didn’t come from film posters or sports pages but lived right amidst us, in the alley beside the Irani Café, in a rambling, well-guarded building that was Abu Hathim sahib’s home and refuge rolled into one” (*VB*, 16–17).

Vanity Bagh opens with Imran Jabbari being sentenced to sixteen years in “the Indian version of Guantanamo,” on charges of terrorism and conspiracy against the state (*VB*, 220). After he is assigned the job of bookbinder in jail, he stares at the blank pages of his books and imagines into presence his ordinary, impoverished life as the son of an imam prior to being sentenced: “I stay on the page and stare at it, until I saw an alphabet, then a word, a sentence, a paragraph, a page, a story” (*VB*, 10). The nation impinges on Imran’s consciousness both inside and outside the jail as he is asked by a team of people who come to the jail for a workshop with the inmates if his father appreciates extremist organizations such as Al-Qaeda and Taliban or what he was taught in the local madrasa. Salim’s narrative draws on each of the stereotypes that Indian Muslims navigate in a supposedly secular country, one of which is being branded as “Pakistanis” because of their celebration of Pakistan’s victory against England in the Cricket

⁴⁷ Anees Salim, *Vanity Bagh* (New Delhi: Picador India, 2013), 12. Hereafter cited in the text as *VB*.

World Cup in 1992 (the same year when the Babri Mosque was demolished by fundamentalist Hindus). As Imran recounts, “Vanity Bagh [found] a new name: Little Pakistan” (*VB*, 55). Salim inverts this trope of suspicion of Indian Muslims as he names the members of Imran’s gang after Pakistani politicians, producing a dark humor signifying the impossibility of Indian Muslims’ ability to extricate themselves from being othered. In re-creating the microcosm of subcontinental politics, Salim situates the Muslim-predominant Vanity Bagh across from the Hindu-predominant Mehendi locality. They are separated by the Line of Control, which forbids free movement of citizens into each other’s territories. When members of the 5½ Men launch their first project at the behest of a pawnbroker, in which they seize a car from a defaulter, Imran crosses into the supposedly forbidden Mehendi neighborhood.

Within the constricted space of Vanity Bagh, Muslims are split between their allegiance to Islam and their tenuous belonging to the nation, as is demonstrated in the imam’s decision to hoist the national flag at the local mosque on Independence Day. The imam dresses up in his finer clothes, which “he usually reserved for days as special as Eid or Muharram,” and asks the local photographer, Javed Miandad, to take his picture, hoping it will appear in the local media (*VB*, 112). Salim’s novel subtly picks on the Indian Muslims’ performative nationalism. Despite being thwarted from claiming their full citizenship, they know what makes the majority community warm up to its marginalized citizens: an overt demonstration of flag-waving hypernationalism. The action in the novel reaches an inflection point when a man named Qadir, apparently a florist in Vanity Bagh, approaches the members of the 5½ Men and asks them to drive three scooters, loaded with smuggled gold, to prominent locations in the city: “We would just ride the scooters to the address Qadir would furnish us with. We would park them at specified places and just walk away. We would be carriers” (*VB*, 170). The members of the gang do not know that the scooters are also carrying bombs, which go off immediately after the scooters are parked, resulting in charges of terrorism from the intelligence agencies. The agencies assign the name 11/11 to the operation, suggesting that the events of 9/11 have reoriented the attitude of people toward Muslims in India. In the global discourse of Islam as antithetical to all liberal civilizational values, Salim’s novel demonstrates how Islamophobia has taken over the Indian psyche, rendering the previously used term “communalism,” denoting localized conflicts between different communities in India, almost obsolete.

In *Vanity Bagh* the othering of Indian Muslims as Pakistanis converges with their othering on a global scale as potential terrorists, something that even the

rival Hindu neighborhood of Mehendi has difficulty accepting: “For them [inhabitants of Mehendi], we were nothing more than a poor neighbourhood that was home to petty criminals, infamous conmen and an extortionist who successfully repackaged himself as Robin Hood. Terrorists we could never be” (VB, 197). Toward the end of the novel, the tone turns from comic to sober as Imran is taken through Vanity Bagh to identify his comrade Zia, who escapes from jail and later is killed. As the jail vehicle goes past his house, Imran sees his younger brother walking with his nephew and remembers his father’s words to his now-dead mother when she first arrived at Vanity Bagh as a new bride: “This is Vanity Bagh, where we will build our home and make it heaven-like” (VB, 238). Salim’s novel narrates the hopelessness of a community that has lost its anchor in the ongoing political wrangling. The author corroborated this hopelessness in his acceptance speech after winning the Hindu Award: “The book is not about hope. It is about hopelessness. More than anything else, it is about distress and religious intolerance that can divide humanity and win elections.”⁴⁸

Andaleeb Wajid’s novel *My Brother’s Wedding* provides a peek into the custom of Muslim marriage in a middle-class family based in Bengaluru.⁴⁹ In a narrative technique that alternates between realistic description of the narrator’s family and the narrator’s personal blog, the novel relates the hopes, aspirations, and idiosyncrasies of an ordinary Muslim family whose son is about to be married. While the narrator’s blog adopts a confessional tone, spilling the family secrets in cyberspace, in maintaining the anonymity of the characters through the use of made-up initials for their names, the blog and the descriptive apparatus of the novel converge at the end, revealing the identity of the anonymous blogger. The narrative sets up a conflict between the conservative modes of a Muslim family in which marriage is still a negotiation between parents and the tech savviness of the younger generation of Muslims. The narrator Saba’s elder brother, Zohaib, is a software engineer who engages in premarital sex with a Hindu female colleague in his office; Saba’s elder sister, Rabia, an aspiring fashion designer, is stuck in an unhappy marriage with Rafiq, a Muslim man from another sect; and Saba, despite her love for Shahid, is torn between her desire to be an independent woman and her family’s desire for her to marry and settle down.

Under the supposed normality of everyday life, the novel foregrounds the conflicting pulls between tradition and consumerism, between austerity and

⁴⁸ Vasudha Venugopal, “*Vanity Bagh* Is about Distress and Religious Intolerance,” *The Hindu*, January 14, 2014, <https://www.pressreader.com/india/the-hindu/20140114/281904476029893>.

⁴⁹ Andaleeb Wajid, *My Brother’s Wedding* (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2013). Hereafter cited in the text as *MBW*.

ostentatiousness, between stereotypical notions of the Muslim community and fissures within the community. On the day Zohaib's family comes to see him, he sits in his living room with a skull cap on: "It was not a decoy, he told himself, and he was not deceiving them into believing that he read namaz regularly because he did read namaz. Just not as regularly as he ought to" (*MBW*, 16–17). A pregnant Rabia relocates to her parents' house with the intention of separating from her husband, whom she thinks is a jinn. She finally realizes her mistake after consulting a website on jinns: "According to the website, a human could get married to a jinn. But they could never have a child. And here she was, pregnant. So obviously, Rafiq was ... human" (*MBW*, 201). An austere and sensible Saba secretly wants to appear glamorous in her special burkha brought from Dubai: "I know, I know ... the burkha is not meant to add glamour, but rather to detract from it, but it was my brother's engagement after all" (*MBW*, 65). Uzair, a cousin of Zohaib's bride who has returned from London, upsets the traditional segregated spaces during the engagement as he barges into a room where the women sit: "He saw all the women seated inside but didn't seem deterred by it at all" (*MBW*, 67). He is dismissed as someone who has been corrupted by Western influence. In her cloistered existence in a conservative Muslim family, Saba dares to invite Uzair for coffee. Smitten at first by his charm, she comes to realize that he is shallow and finally settles for Shahid, who has secretly loved her for a long time without being able to express it to her. As the ordinary becomes constricted, Saba takes recourse to the technology-mediated online space to converse with strangers about the secrets of her family. The novel skillfully weaves the dilemma of many younger Muslims torn between tradition and modernity with a dash of humor. In fact, humor becomes a coping mechanism in the face of difficulties faced by Muslims in an increasingly Hindu India. The narrator subverts some of the stereotypes about Muslims even as she narrates the contradictions in a middle-class Muslim family in the twenty-first century.

Reflections on the Muslim Experience in India

The novels discussed above expand the "narrative imagination," to return to Nussbaum's formulation, of readers both within and outside academia. Indian Anglophone Muslim novels offer reflections on complex Muslim cultural experiences in India, caught between tradition and modernity, religiosity and secularism, austerity and consumerism. Each of the novelists works through certain stereotypes about the community to foreground the difficult choices Muslims must make in a hostile nation-space that questions their allegiance and citizenship. As is the case with minor literature, these novels aspire to a collec-

tive cartography of Muslim cultural experience that necessitates a negotiation between religious commitments and worldly desires. In the novels of Rushdie, Futehally, and Karim, the protagonists embody a disconnect between India's professed secularity and its increasing turn to right-wing Hindu nationalism, echoing Jameson's formulation that all Third World literature is primarily a national allegory. In contrast, Tyrewala's, Salim's, and Wajid's novels engage with the specificities of everyday Muslim life, embodied in practices of consumerism, erotic longings, material ambition, and negotiation with technology. Because of its own investment in the material world, the novel form is able to subvert the stereotypes associated with Muslims as being solely preoccupied with their religion. Instead, these novels depict a complex negotiation between the sacral and the worldly, between religious commitment and material desires. As a practice of the humanities, the Indian Anglophone Muslim novels invite readers to peek into the hopes, aspirations, desires, and frustrations of a people consigned to a liminal space in the nation.

Drawing on select Indian Anglophone Muslim novels, this essay has argued that the production, dissemination, and consumption of fiction are crucial components of the practice of the humanities. As part of the university curriculum, Indian Anglophone Muslim novels deconstruct the canon of Indian Anglophone writing and invite the practitioners of literary and cultural studies to engage with the cultural experiences of a beleaguered Muslim community. As public humanities, these novels contribute to a nuanced understanding of marginal Muslim life in a fraught nation-space. The reading of such a minor literature has the potential to expand the narrative imagination of its readers, necessitating a critical and empathetic engagement with a vulnerable marginalized community. These novels become an important site of reflection, contestation, and engagement with the Muslim community living precariously since India's independence and particularly since the 1980s with the advent of a Hindu nationalism that constructs its national imaginary on the basis of the exclusion of Muslims as others. Indian Anglophone Muslim novels written since the 1980s foreground Indian Muslims' tenuous sense of engagement with the nation and their crisis of belonging to the supposedly secular nation-space. The practice of humanities both within and outside academia in India must seriously consider these Muslim novels as both the self-expression of a community and valuable documents for understanding their distinctive sense of culture and ways of being in the world. To that extent, fiction ought to serve an important role in furthering the imaginative capacities for constructive civic engagement in a plural society. India's new National Education Policy 2020 reiterates this critical vision of the humanities as it seeks to expand the narrative imagination of its citizens.

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