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Postcolonial Satire in Cynical Times

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ABSTRACT

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Following post-1945 decolonization, many anticolonial figures became disenchanted, for they witnessed not the birth of social revolution, but the mere transfer of power from corrupt white elites to corrupt native elites. Soon after, many postcolonial writers jettisoned the political sincerity of social realism for satire—a less naïve, more pessimistic literary genre and approach to social critique. Satires about the postcolonial condition employ a cynical idiom even as they often take political cynicism as their chief object of derision. This dissertation is among the first literary studies to discuss the use of satire in postcolonial writing, exploring how and why some major Anglophone global writers from decolonization onward use the genre to critique political cynicisms affecting the developing world. It does so by weaving together seemingly disparate novels from the 1960s until today, including Chinua Achebe’s sendup of failed idealism in Africa, Salman Rushdie’s and Hanif Kureishi’s caricatures of Margaret Thatcher’s enterprise culture, and Aravind Adiga’s and Mohsin Hamid’s parodies of self-help narratives in South Asia.

Satire is an effective form of social critique for these authors because it is equal opportunity, avoiding simplistic approaches to power and oppression in the postcolonial era. Satire often blames everyone—including itself—by insisting on irony, hypocrisy, and interdependence as existential conditions. Postcolonial satires ridicule victims and victimizers alike, exchanging the politics of blame for messiness, association, and implication. The satires examined here emphasize that we are all, to different degrees, mutually implicated subjects, especially in the era of global capitalism. This dissertation thus contests critics who argue that
the subgenre engages in victim blaming, indulges in colonial-era stereotypes about the developing world, and supports political nihilism. Postcolonial satirists cut a path between the optimism expected of them and the fatalism they are accused of by offering a third path between that stifling dichotomy: a mutually implicating, humorous form of social critique that nuances neocolonial forms of power—including cynicism itself.
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INTRODUCTION

Cynical Postcolonial Satire: African Beginnings, Theoretical Underpinnings

“There are two things in Indian history—one is the incredible optimism and potential of the place, and the other is the betrayal of that potential—for example, corruption. Those two strands intertwine through the whole of Indian history, and maybe not just Indian history.”

—Salman Rushdie

Ayi Kwei Armah’s 1968 satirical novel, *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, epitomizes the genre of writing that titles this introduction. The novel’s protagonist is an impoverished and unnamed rail worker the third-person narrator refers to only as “the man.” Armah’s “man” spends the majority of the text trying to avoid the corruption, materialism, and degradation he sees as rampant in postcolonial Ghana, a place he condemns throughout the novel in a scatological idiom. His only confidante and refuge is his friend “The Teacher,” whose philosophy of despair the man contemplates and often enacts in his day-to-day life. When pondering the hopeful time of anticolonialism in Ghana, Teacher indicts Kwame Nkrumah and other socialist leaders in Africa for spreading an impossible idealism—a populist optimism that would eventually lead to the enrichment of few at the expense of many:

How long will Africa be cursed with its leaders? There were men dying from the loss of hope, and others were finding gaudy ways to enjoy power they did not have. We were ready here for big and beautiful things, but what we had was our own black men hugging new paunches scrambling to ask the white man to welcome them onto our backs. These men who were to lead us out of our despair, they came like men already grown fat and cynical … How were these leaders to
know that while they were climbing up to shit in their people's faces, their people had seen their arseholes and drawn away in disgusted laughter? (82)

The passage registers the disillusionment and resigned humor of many African authors following post-WWII decolonization. African intellectuals writing in the 1960s witnessed the rise of obscene kleptocracies, the comprador elite’s grotesque self-interest, and the abject poverty following decolonization, catalyzing their often self-loathing and self-satirizing portraits of a post-independence society betrayed by the high promises of anticolonial rhetoric. Often criticized for recreating the same colonial-era epithets anticolonial figures wrote against, these authors used scatological satire to express their frustration toward independence as neither triumphant nor revolutionary, but as the mere transfer of power from corrupt white elites to corrupt black elites. But even more important, these texts use excremental language to indict both the post-independence elite and the underclasses they oppress, deriding the former for engaging in the unabashed opportunism of the elite cynic, and the latter for resorting to the reconciled fatalism of the disempowered cynic. Armah’s novel exemplifies the genre of what I am calling cynical postcolonial satire, for in it both victims and victimizers are not only culpable (to varying degrees) for the failure of anticolonialism to lead to social revolution, but also representatives of the disempowering and opportunistic cynicisms born in the wake of what these authors saw as post-independence failure.

*Postcolonial Satire in Cynical Times* explores cynical postcolonial satire as a genre both born of and addressed to the disillusionment following decolonization and other botched emancipatory projects throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It examines why many postcolonial authors from the 1960s onward—namely, Chinua Achebe, Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, Aravind Adiga, and Mohsin Hamid—employ satire instead of the literary convention
with which they are often associated—sentimental realism. Satire is an effective form of social critique for the same reason it troubles critics: it cuts a path between the political optimism and pessimism that stifle contemporary discourse about the developing world. Critics of the subgenre declare sympathetic realism the most politically responsible means of representing the postcolonial condition, leading them to accuse satire of cynicism because it does not romanticize the oppressed or posit a clear normative claim. This scholarly expectation engages in a politics of blame that oversimplifies power relations and misidentifies new logics of coercion. Satire, by contrast, exchanges the politics of outrage, guilt, and absolution for a humorous social critique that stresses messiness, interdependence, and association. If the satires this dissertation examines highlight the forms of cynicism inflicting post-independence Africa, Thatcherite England, and global-capitalist India, then the project also opposes the moralistic criticism that claims postcolonial satire disavows politics, for these texts satirize precisely that disavowal.

This introduction works as a chapter in its own right, showing throughout how Armah’s novel, its mixed reception, and recent critical theory set the stage for the subject matter, tenor, and reception of other, seemingly unrelated cynical postcolonial satires. As is the case with many of the satires discussed here, The Beautiful Ones prompted critics to accuse Armah of both victim-blaming and self-exempting intellectualism. For them, the novel’s dissipative vision rehashes the colonial rhetoric that framed the colonized as filthy and barbaric. But this vision is the novel’s point insofar as it also uses excremental tropes subversively, repurposing the rhetoric of empire that framed the colonized as fundamentally dirty and disordered. The Beautiful Ones identifies the presence of neocolonial politics, materialism, and capitalism in Ghana as abject residue, critiquing the West as the source of the underdevelopment it attributes to the colonized. As Armah’s and African literature’s primary satirical device, scatology parodies colonial history
and rhetoric, both of which frame the colonized as the chaff blocking the purifying march of colonial modernity.¹⁴

This is not to say that Armah’s novel spares the victim. Far from it. For however much colonialism in the novel lingers on in Ghana’s comprador elite, neocolonial power also pervades the whole of society in what Armah calls “the gleam.” A figure for the oscillating disgust and allure the man feels when looking at the light emitted by Ghana’s poshest hotel (located next to the country’s most squalid surroundings), the gleam is the novel’s metaphor for the postcolonial subject’s fall into materialism and corruption in a Ghana driven to cynical self-interest by scarcity and Western cultural influence. So although the man lacks the “hardness that the gleam requires,” which is to say the cynical opportunism necessary to get ahead in a corrupt state, most figures in Armah’s Ghana embrace this hardness quite easily (35). This is because Ghanaians in the novel’s estimation are subject to a mutually implicating episteme—to the cunning, consumerism, and misanthropy that for Armah characterize a postcolonial Ghana under the spell of global capitalism. Hence the novel’s imprecision when characterizing the gleam as a form of equal-opportunity capitalist subjectivation: “The gleam, in moments of honesty, had a power to produce a disturbing ambiguity within. It would be good to say that the gleam never did attract. It would be good, but it would be far from the truth. And something terrible was happening as time went on. It was getting harder to tell whether the gleam repelled more than it attracted, attracted more than it repelled, or just did both at once in one disgustingly confused feeling all the time these heavy days” (10).

For Armah scholar Derek Wright, the scatologist’s metaphor for the expediency and cynical double consciousness (“a disturbing ambiguity within”) that haunts post-independence Ghana renders political distinctions impossible, relying as it does on a vague point of reference
that subsumes “alike those who pursue and those who shrink from the gleam, the oppressor and
the most abjectly oppressed” (“Dystopia” 29). Wright’s position here—that Armah unfairly
satirizes victims and victimizers alike for the failures of independence—echoes that of many
critics who misidentify the function of cynical postcolonial satire. Such critics deplore how the
genre of Armah’s novel does not revert to the Manichean—if once effective—anticolonial
distinctions between colonizers and colonized. Nor does the novel engage in the politics of
positive images, which replaces negative images of the marginalized with positive ones. Instead,
it condemns positive image politics as yet another anti-colonial binary—as a naïve, misleading,
and even alienating form of cultural redress that plays down the more systemic, insidious forms
of power at work in the postcolony. In this way, cynical postcolonial satire represents post-
independence failure within a model of systemic, all-encompassing blame, one that is non- and
even post-normative.

Hence the novel’s use of excrement as a literary device to signal a modern anxiety about
decolonization’s failure to fulfill its idealistic promises. When encountering an excessively drunk
night soil worker, the man muses: “Surely that is the only way for a man to survive, carrying
other people's excrement; the only way must be to kill the self while the unavoidable is being
done” (103). Here we see the narrator wax allegorically; he uses what to his mind is Ghana’s
most marginalized subject to make a wider claim about the appeal of cynicism in a time when
the postcolonial individual appears to suffer the burden of carrying the abject residue of
colonialism and also that of a politically resigned postcolonial society, leading him to praise
cynicism as a useful salve against the inevitability of political betrayal and disappointment (“the
unavoidable”). In The Beautyful Ones, scatology thus functions as a mutually implicating
metaphor that renders Ghana’s botched independence the repulsive byproduct of a joint, cyclical,
and universal condition, one correspondent with human evacuation as a collective feature of a humanity drawn toward passivity and ruin, not progress and enlightenment. As J.D. Esty notes in the best and most influential scholarship on postcolonial scatology to date, “[i]n Armah and Soyinka … scatological satire attaches shame to previously immune classes—including detached artists—who are, by apparent inaction, also to blame for the execrable state of affairs in the postcolony. Shit—as wielded by these writers—is a perfectly precise instrument for recording a tragically imprecise kind of predicament” (35).

Here Esty explains how African scatological satire works as a systemic form of critique that is self-satirizing (“including detached artists”), drawing on the heavy symbolic resonance of shit to engage in a form of collective self-implication that urges us to exchange anticolonial binaries for postcolonial models of systemic blame. Postcolonial Satire in Cynical Times draws on Esty’s insights but extends them beyond the scope of scatological satire into a longer genealogy of postcolonial writing, one that satirizes the cynical subjectivity for whom scatology becomes an attractive and useful literary device in the first place. This genre of writing critiques the structural, cultural, and historical conditions that produce various postcolonial cynicisms. In this way, Chinua Achebe, Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, Aravind Adiga, and Mohsin Hamid satirize and perform the cynicisms of their respective contexts, and which emerged from the perceived failures of decolonization and other forms of botched progressive politics. In doing so, they offer a critical cynicism of their own, one that indicteds cynicism as depoliticizing but rescues cynicism’s critical component as useful in jaded times, when optimism fails to address adequately the post-political passivity that has concerned authors of postcolonial literature since decolonization.⁵
Crucial to cynical postcolonial satire, then, is its constant self-implication, for without it this genre of writing would hypocritically enact one of its main objects of satire: the Manichean, moralistic vision that carves the world into an Us vs. Them binary, a binary that leads us to overlook the economic and structural conditions that, at least for the authors discussed here, rendered official decolonization merely gestural. In the spirit of avoiding such misleading binaries, cynical postcolonial satire blames everyone—including itself. So by no means does Armah’s exemplary and pioneering cynical satire exclude itself from its all-damning vision. Armah’s novel might blame the victim, but it also thematizes its own culpability in post-independence failure by criticizing the knee-jerk cynicism of overly naïve anti-colonial intellectuals, those radicals who, facing political miscarriage, all too quickly spoke as failed idealists.

Thus after the man explains to his wife, Oyo, why he has rejected a much-needed bribe not out of fear of getting caught, but out of principle, she satirizes his elitist sense of moral and political purity, turning his jaded worldview against him:

‘Some of that cleanness has more rottenness in it than the slime at the bottom of a garbage dump’ … ‘Mmmmm…’ the woman almost sang. ‘You are the Chichidodo itself.’ ‘Now what do you mean by that?’ The man’s voice was not angry, just intrigued. Very calmly, the woman gave him her reply. ‘Ah, you know, the chichidodo is a bird. The chichidodo hates excrement with all its soul. But the chichidodo only feeds on maggots, and you know maggots grow best inside the lavatory. This is the chichidodo.’ The woman was smiling (45).

By invoking the figure of a bird that nourishes itself with the very thing it hates, Oyo satirizes her husband’s hypocritical piety. She exposes the man’s self-abdicating disdain for nearly
everyone in a post-independence Ghana he paints as hopelessly corrupt and corrupting. Here the chichidodo registers the hypocritical piety of a resigned postcolonial subject, one who projects his cynicism onto what he sees as the blameworthy African masses, exposing how the man authors the very cynicism he attributes to Ghana’s masses.

Later on in the novel, the chichidodo takes on another valence when it becomes a figure for the derivatively Western tenor of some forms of post-independence cynicism. Hence the man’s recently deceased friend, Rama Krishna, a citizen of Ghana who “had taken that far off name in the reincarnation of his soul after [a] long and tortured flight from everything close and everything known, since all around him showed him the horrible threat of decay” (48). Krishna responds to a Ghana he can no longer identify with by withdrawing into himself, drawing on a Western philosophy of asceticism in order to remain pure in a debased and debasing society:

Near the end he had discovered the one way: he would not corrupt himself by touching any woman but saved his semen to rejuvenate his brain by standing on his head a certain number of minutes every night and every dawn. Everywhere he wore a … faraway look on his face, thinking of the escape from corruption and of immortality. It was of consumption that he died, so very young, but already his body inside had undergone far more decay than any living body … It was whispered … that the disease had eaten up the frail matter of his lungs, and that where his heart ought to have been there was only a living lot of worms gathered together tightly in the shape of a heart. And so what did the dead rot inside the friend not have to do with his fear of what was decaying outside of himself? … And the man wondered what kind of sound the cry of the chichidodo bird could
be, the bird longing for its maggots but fleeing the feces which gave them birth (49).

Here Rama Krishna’s self-destructive descent into asceticism echoes the disposition Hegel associated with literary Romanticism—what he called “the beautiful soul.” Born of a compensatory desire for purity, the beautiful soul is a figure that trumpets its authenticity—its inward delicacy of moral feeling and insight—against the outside world’s infectious depravity. For Hegel, the concept names morally sensitive yet ethically paralyzed subjects. As Timothy Morton describes it, beautiful soul syndrome (“BS for short”) describes a subject that thinks itself unpolluted and post-ideological, but which in its rationalized passivity embodies the evil in the world it claims to see.

In the context of Africa’s literature of disillusionment—and especially that of Achebe’s, as we will see in the first chapter—beautiful soul syndrome describes how the self-acquitted elite often rationalize their abandonment of politics through a delicate, Western-style aestheticism. In Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease*, such aestheticism functions a form of cynicism endemic to the novel’s “been-to” figure, Obi Okonkwo. Educated in colonial literatures, cultures, and idealisms, the “been to” is a literary figure that has traveled to the West for education or work and returns home with high but inevitably failed expectations regarding the progress made since independence. Caught as he is between his African origins and Western education, Obi embodies the same self-exempting, derivatively Western cynicism of Armah’s protagonist and Rama Krishna.

Crucial here is the irony of Armah’s literary and thematic resemblance to Achebe. This irony offers a useful object lesson in what I am calling postcolonial moralism, which, briefly put, is the accusation that authors of cynical postcolonial satire are post-political nihilists. We will
define the term and its importance at length later, but for now useful to understanding the term is an example of its enactment in Achebe’s negative critical response to Armah’s novel. Indeed, despite their shared interest in anatomizing and satirizing post-independence cynicism, Achebe accuses Armah of a treacherous post-political nihilism in his takedown of *The Beautiful Ones*. Recall how Achebe’s influential “Africa and Her Writers” pits an alienated, depoliticized, and solipsistic European writer against a sincere, cultural-nationalist, and organic African intellectual that ventriloquizes and prognosticates a culture in all its complexity. Here Achebe defines the moral-utilitarian role of African art against what he calls the high-modernist truism that “[w]ords like *use, purpose, value* are beneath the divine concerns of … art, and so are we [Africans], the vulgarians craving the message and the morality” (“Africa” 618).

Using this framework, Achebe accuses Armah of fetishizing high modernism’s swank sense of anomie. He diagnoses him an “alienated native” sick with “*human condition* syndrome,” by which Achebe means the angst popularized by European existentialist authors (624). Fashionable as it was, this “syndrome” made its way into much postindependence African writing, prompting Achebe to call it “the near-pathological eagerness to contract the sicknesses of Europe in the horribly mistaken belief that [African literature’s] claim to sophistication is improved thereby” (624). By moralizing against Armah as turncoat to himself and his people—“[a] man is never more defeated than when he is running away from himself”—Achebe condemns Africa’s scatological literature as a form of modernist navel-gazing, voicing the characteristic retort against the satires examined here (626-7).

But notice the irony of Achebe’s diagnosis: Achebe accuses Armah’s novel of what it critiques in the first place. Achebe accuses *The Beautiful Ones* of a post-political cynicism detrimental to what he sees as the populist, didactic, and instrumental function of African
literature—but Armah’s novel critiques precisely that post-political cynicism. An exemplary critic of cynical satire, Achebe epitomizes the moralism of critics of postcolonial satire. Such critics demand of cultural representation a genre of writing more didactic and populist, and also misrecognize cynical postcolonial satire as affirming its very objects of critique.

As Achebe’s misreading suggests, cynical postcolonial satires are difficult to locate politically because they both deploy and deride the cynicism of their protagonists, leaving their politics uncertain. Such uncertainty is the point insofar as the performative aspect of cynical postcolonial satire allows for a critique of cynicism that rescues the self-same as a form of skepticism more rhetorically useful in disillusioned times than sincerity or optimism. If, as Rushdie in the epigraph above reminds us, the history of the postcolony is (at least from his pessimistic standpoint) one of betrayal, then that history also marks a radical shift in the tenor of literature from and about the underdeveloped world: from anticolonial sincerity and buoyancy, to postcolonial irony and cynicism. And this shift entails a rhetorical strategy of its own. For as R. Jay Magill Jr. reminds, “Efforts … to oppose irony … with sincerity or earnestness have not understood that sincerity as a moral vision can no longer, in a cultural moment that so often seems a frightening yet absolutely predictable joke, be spoken literally to have any effect” (xi). Cynical postcolonial satires thus inhabit cynicism to a critical end, critiquing postcolonial cynicism while performing the self-same as a form of equal-opportunity, non-normative skepticism and satirical truth-telling.

Cynical satire’s modus operandi is deliberately paradoxical: anti-politics for the sake of politics, irony for the sake of sincerity, dystopia for the sake of a better future. Such a paradox makes sense for those writing in the wake of botched political visions: if sincerity and idealism are less rhetorically useful in jaded times, then a cynical satire bereft of optimism may be the
best form of political critique we have left. For as David Mazella reminds us, cynicism feeds upon its remedies, meaning that the answer to political disaffection does not reside in the strong dose of optimism Achebe and other moralists suggest we swallow: “the political idealism that discounts widely shared feelings of cynicism only confirms and reinforces the cynical belief that popular beliefs have no effect on the political system” (fn 16).

How, then, to render critique effective in a cynical society, where critique itself appears impotent, and the demand to chin up only feeds feelings of disempowerment? Cynical satire’s answer: enmeshed and interconnected social worlds that preclude any pure subject position and thus refuse to reinforce us vs. them, victim vs. victimizer, friend vs. enemy distinctions—precisely those binaries that drove the anticolonial movements, but which today lack critical purchase. Crucial here is David Scott’s reminder that “the conception of colonialism that postcolonialism has constructed and made the target of its analytical focus has continued to bear the distinctive traces of anticolonialism’s conceptual preoccupations” (6). Here Scott points to how one of postcolonial theory’s guiding preoccupation—how to think about resistance and power when those categories become diffuse, fluid, no longer tied to a definitive name and face—constitutes a much different question than that posed by colonies at the brink of independence. For those colonies, decolonization was of paramount importance, and the first step toward liberation was to decide how to make firm, strategic, and necessary distinctions between oppressor and oppressed, colonized and colonizer.

More to the point, the use of such anticolonial categories in our own postcolonial moment owes a great deal to the attractive because Hegelian and teleological narrative form in which anticolonialism often articulates itself. As Scott argues, although this form proved useful to anticolonial writers—particularly to Negritude and the writings of Aimé Césaire and C.L.R.
James—they are less useful to our postcolonial time, in which the spell of total revolution withers:

[A]nticolonial stories about past, present, and future have typically been emplotted in a distinct narrative form, one with a distinctive story-potential: that of Romance. They have tended to be narratives of overcoming, often narratives of vindication; they have tended ... to tell stories of salvation and redemption. They have largely depended on a certain (utopian) horizon toward which the emancipationist history is imagined to be moving (6).

What, then, might be a more relevant and convincing postcolonial narrative form now that anticolonial Romance did the work of mobilizing anticolonial sentiment, but today appears outdated, if not foolhardy and limiting, in the wake of postcolonial disappointment? If “[t]he old languages of moral-political vision are no longer in sync with the world they were meant to describe and normatively criticize,” then what narrative form and genre might offer ways out of a postcolonial time when the old revolutionary binaries lose traction, optimism reinforces the status quo, and cynicism is the default subject position of elite and underclasses alike? (2)

Emerging from the discontent and frustration following decolonization, cynical satire is a context-resistant mode of writing, one that doubles down on the same unremitting truths about humankind’s folly within a fictional framework that is usually anti-teleological, if not dystopian to greater and lesser degrees. And beginning as it does with Africa’s literature of disillusionment and its pessimistic backlash against postcolonial nationalism and some forms of Negritude,6 cynical postcolonial satire extends to new purposes and contexts the pessimism of Jonathan Swift. As Esty points out, Swift’s scathing satires of British colonialism rarely if ever valorized the Irish, making him into something of a distant poster child for postcolonial satirists unwilling
to follow the anticolonial move to grant moral priority to one political party or subject over another. Instead, such satirists found in excrement a useful idiom for expressing their hatred of the elite and masses alike: “As much as he criticized the neglectful British, he also attacked the Irish for their backwardness. Such double vision seems to generate the vexed tone of much Swiftian political satire. As a cultural intermediary or interpreter who links scatology to failed development, Swift stands as a distant precursor to the excremental writers of postcolonial Africa and Ireland” (28).

But Swift’s distant influence on Africa’s postcolonial satirists extends well beyond the use of scatology, which in any case has a distinct genealogy in many African oral traditions (31). Indeed, the influential satirist’s pessimism and preference for ethics over morality emerge in the work of postcolonial satirists within and outside Africa’s literature of disillusionment. As is in the cynical postcolonial satires discussed here, Swift’s pessimism is not fatalistic or apolitical, but rather the precondition for a form of satire that remains only distantly invested in the possibility of reform and progress, avoiding a prescriptive morality that would give the lie to the premise of cynical satire: that there is no place for a universal morality, norm, or ethics of conduct in a postcolonial time characterized by interconnected, ever-changing contexts and fields of power. Swift’s cynicism thus echoes that of the authors discussed here insofar as he “remain[s] within the official Augustan idea that satire shall seek ethical effect, but … addresses problems at their most basic stage: nobody can reform manners without learning to see straight. The ethics of perception are a more interesting concern for satire than the simple ethics of conduct, because they do not preclude a hearty respect for the dangers of evil” (Alan Fisher 356).

Here Alan Fisher allows us to see why Swift and those writing in his wake use cynical satire not to prescribe morality or posit a utopian horizon of possibility, but to offer a political
critique that seeks a nondidactic purpose: to “clarify perception” with a nonnormative, performative critique. By this I mean that the performative nature of cynical satire, which expresses the very cynicism it critiques, “respects” cynicism as a pervasive, equal-opportunity form of subjectivation by performing its own capture by that subjectivation. If cynicism is the cultural expression of our postcolonial time under global capitalism, then we might effectively critique that despairing expression from within lest we posit yet another disillusioning teleological politics.

Useful here is Jeffrey T. Nealon’s guiding question in Post-Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Just-In-Time-Capitalism (2012). Nealon’s question is in many ways our own, for a major point of concern in Postcolonial Satire is what cultural critique can do in a time when global capitalism is a cultural dominant, perhaps rendering critique impotent because contaminated by the logic it seeks to subvert: “If ideology critique depends on a cultural outside to the dominant economic logics, where does cultural critique go now that there is no such outside, no dependable measuring stick to celebrate a work’s resistance or to denounce its ideological complicity?” (176-7). Here Nealon asks what critical theory can do now that Frederic Jameson’s thesis—that postmodernism is the cultural logic of late capitalism—has come true. Where does critique go and what can it do in the face of a capitalism that goes all the way down, that contaminates all spheres of life? What is the iconoclastic critic to do against a form of capitalism that is avant-garde and counter-cultural in its own right, often acting as a “cultural dominant whose very mantras turn on the celebration of the new, the resistance to norms and regulations” (179)? However recent this question appears, it is a foundational one for satire insofar as that genre often works strategically to implicate itself and the potential impotence of the critic in its own critique.⁷
The two responses to this question we might offer also characterize the stance of cynical satirists, on the one hand, and that of postcolonial moralists, on the other. The first deploys irony, satire, and other forms of nondidactic critique that work by implication, not direct prescription. Such critique does not assume a position “outside” but rather within its object, employing devices such as parody. As we will see, this is precisely the approach of Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* (2008), which critiques neoliberalism by ventriloquizing global capitalism’s elitist taglines through the mouth of its greatest victim.

The second answer is to double down on the anticolonial, revolutionary teleologies of old within an updated framework. We know this framework today under the aegis of identity politics and the politics of positive images, both of which often (but not always) symptomize what Wendy Brown calls moralism and Walter Benjamin associates with a Left melancholy that has yet to mourn its failed political projects and the concepts that buttressed those projects, As Brown argues,

> We come to love our left passions and reasons, our left analyses and convictions, more than we love the existing world that we presumably seek to alter with these terms or the future that would be aligned with them. Left melancholy, in short, is Benjamin’s name for a mournful, conservative, backward-looking attachment to a feeling, analysis, or relationship that has been rendered thinglike and frozen in the heart of the putative leftist. If Freud is helpful here, then this condition presumably issues from some unaccountable loss, some unavowably crushed ideal, contemprarily signified by the terms left, socialism, Marx, or movement (“Resisting Left Melancholia” 21-2).
*Postcolonial Satire* shows how cynical satire critiques a postcolonial iteration of the Left moralism and melancholy described above. It does so by drawing on Brown’s descriptions of how a sense of unmourned victimization and woundedness become the precondition for moralistic, anti-systemic approaches to politics that Armah associated with anticolonial rhetoric, but which other authors here attribute to more modern forms of politics—namely, the identity-political politics of positive images. This is the politics that accuses cynical postcolonial satire of a treacherous and resigned cynicism.

“Once … the telos of the good vanishes but the yearning for it remains … morality seems to devolve into moralism” (*Politics* 28). Here Brown cites how progressive movements often despair because they feel betrayed by their own utopian narratives, leading them to avoid structural economic analysis, personify oppression in individuals at the cost of systemic inquiry, and valorize besieged identities in a way that reifies socially constructed identity categories. Moralism, then, is born of the inability to instigate social change at higher levels, and is at a loss about how to address the authors of its oppression. It reacts to this loss by dividing the world into the fiction of an Us vs. Them binary—one that echoes the Manichean vision of anti-colonial rhetoric. This division attempts to repair an unmourned persecution by demanding political optimism, insisting on positive portraits of the oppressed, casting the powerful and powerless as allegorical opponents, and framing social realism as the most didactic, populist, and politically responsibly way to represent the condition and problems of the marginalized.

Left moralism, then, is the flip-side of Left cynicism: both are not only reactionary responses to failed progressive endeavors, but are also failed attempts to reorient political expectations and visions once bereft of the teleological grand narratives that inspire progressive movements. But whereas the cynicism of the satires discussed here is nonnormative, tearing
down its objects of derision without offering anything in their place, moralism demands that we cling to the comforting, pluralistic, and teleological categories that buttressed the Left’s old utopian visions. As Brown explains, moralizers end up standing against much but for very little, adopting a voice of moral judgment in the absence of a full-fledged moral apparatus and vision. Alternatively, the moralizer refuses the loss of the teleological and becomes reactionary: clinging without logical ground to the last comforting frame in the unraveling narrative—pluralism, the working class, universal values, the Movement, standpoint epistemology, a melting pot America, women’s essential nature—whatever it was that secured the status of the true, the status of the good, and their unbroken relationship. This, too, is a form of moralizing, but it takes the especially peculiar shape of reproaching history by personifying and reifying its effects in particular individuals, social formations, theories, or belief structures (Politics 28).

With Brown’s analysis in mind, Postcolonial Satire traces how cynical postcolonial satires deride not only depoliticizing and opportunistic forms of cynicism in the wake of failed progressive endeavors, but also the postcolonial moralism inherent in any number of binary and binarizing political formations—including, among others, postcolonial nationalism, identity politics, and civil society. In cynical postcolonial satire, moralism falls short because premised on the same teleologies and binaries that drove anti-colonialism, but which for these texts lack purchase today—and which, disturbingly, might collaborate with precisely those forms of power such binaries were meant to combat in the first place.

In the satires discussed here (and especially that of Rushdie and Kureishi), a primary object of critique is how an identity-political strategy such as positive images favors a
superstructural, anti-systemic form of analysis that proves self-defeating because useful to and welcomed by a late-capitalism that cheers on multiculturalism. Hence Walter Benn Michaels’ critique of identity politics as an unintentional extension of global capitalism’s embrace of liberal iterations of multicultural difference, a difference that might appear subversive to those on the Left because reminiscent of a revolutionary idiom, but which today legitimates and draws attention away from an economic system that celebrates difference:

multiculturalism and diversity more generally are even more effective as a legitimizing tool [of neoliberalism] because they suggest that the ultimate goal of social justice in a neoliberal economy is not that there should be less difference between the rich and the poor—indeed the rule in neoliberal economies is that the difference between the rich and the poor gets wider rather than shrinks—but that no culture should be treated invidiously and that it’s basically OK if economic differences widen as long as the increasingly successful elites come to look like the increasingly unsuccessful non-elites (“Let Them Eat Diversity”).

Here Michaels warns against the attractions of an identity politics already co-opted by a neoliberalism that emerged after the post-war Keynesian consensus waned in the late 1960s—precisely when the new social movements emerged. Jasbir Puar warns against the same when she poses the question of what intersectionality—the dominant paradigm driving identity politics today—looks like “in an age of neo-liberal pluralism,” a time when on a global scale we bear witness to the “absorption and accommodation of difference, of all kinds of differences” by a capitalism that “collude[s] with dominant forms of liberal multiculturalism” (“‘I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess’”). The satires examined here share Michaels’ and Puar’s suspicion toward how the Left conceptualizes oppression and resistance today. For Rushdie and Kureishi
in particular, the liberal multiculturalism Puar critiques is unequal to the task of accounting for a neoliberalism that imposes economic inequality and other forms of systemic oppression without regard to identity or culture—indeed, that uses those categories to enable forms of profit, exploitation, and expansion that are all the more insidious because they fly under the banner of embracing difference.

However contemporary it might seem, such suspicion toward identity-political moralism also has roots in Africa’s literature of disillusionment. Instructive in this regard is Wright’s reminder that many in the time of decolonization were understandably lured toward a politics of Pan-African identity by socialist leaders who all-too-quickly opened their economic borders to the former colonizing powers, embedding their nations in neocolonial networks: “Africans were given high-sounding rhetoric, personality cults that urged them to identify their charismatic leaders’ personal fortunes with their own, and nostalgic communalist myths that, under the guise of socialism, would shortly be used to entrench totalitarian political systems” (“African Literature” 797).

Africa’s literature of disillusionment responds to this betrayal by satirizing collective identity as a false panacea. As Armah suggests in his frequent harangues against Nkrumah’s silencing of political opposition and forging of Ghana into a one-party dictatorship, numerous African leaders professed socialism and Pan-African identity only to exploit those forms of collectivity for personal gain. Perhaps more important, they often did so under the guise of those identity-political, anticolonial categories attractive to a disillusioned populace looking for hope and political ground to stand on. In the Africa of Armah, Pan Africanism and Negritude might have accomplished forms of cultural healing and redress, but also were tools in the hands of
political cynics, detracting from systemic concerns that were ignored in favor of forms of culture that many mistook as automatically subversive.

The primary critical dynamic *Postcolonial Satire* describes—between moralism and cynicism as binary yet interrelated responses to political failure—is as follows: in the wake of political disappointment, moralism appears attractive because it insists on the categories that helped consolidate antiestablishment thought and also catalyzed feelings of solidarity based on a communal discontent. Moralism thus retreats into a feel-good, nostalgic politics that avoids wrestling with the dizzying complexities of our postlapsarian, poststructuralist, postcolonial moment, one where the political categories that once grounded social reality and progressive struggles no longer help to describe more systemic and increasingly complex forms of power—the primary one for us here being global capitalism, the primary object of satire in the last three chapters.

Cynicism, on the other hand, is an equally myopic, feel-good, and reactionary response to political disappointment, one that evades the inevitable disappointments of politics though a weary, self-exempting, anti-political resignation to an ahistorical logic: if society and humanity tend toward failure, then it is best to look out for oneself, for in our posthistorical, postrevolutionary time, accommodation ensures survival, not the vulnerability any politics necessarily entails.

Here we see why neoliberalism proves so important to *Postcolonial Satire*, for it is our postcolonial era’s most extensive source of cynicism and form of depoliticizing subjectivation, and thus a major satirical target for all of the satires (save Achebe’s and, to a lesser extent, Armah’s) discussed here. As Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) attests, neoliberalism also celebrates itself as “post-historical,” as marking the triumph of
capitalism at the end of history (and not Marx’s communism). The term, however, is a complex one insofar as it has both a theoretical and practical valence. Practically, neoliberalism works by privatizing all spheres of life, promoting free market policies that dismantle the welfare state, monetizing every service and commodity imaginable, and increasing the wealth gap everywhere.

It does so not by enforcing a strict laissez-faire policy, but rather an interventionism that ensures market advantage. For example, neoliberalism makes its mark on postcolonial contexts through the imperialist imposition of structural readjustment programs (SAPs) that restructure economies, isolationist and otherwise, in the favor of the free flow of capital. Such restructuring is the price exacted by often Western-capitalist states from those who borrow (and are forced to by the dire conditions of the world market) loans from the IMF, World Bank, and former imperial powers. SAPs thus force postcolonial states to open their borders not only to the influx of often volatile private interest and capital, but also to the forms of exploitation that capital entails. Such colonial-era extortion—beneficial to a global elite increasingly multicultural in character—renders independent states into neocolonies that are subject to the ups and downs of a world market that extracts surplus labor from former colonies. To give a more specific example, in postcolonial nations such as India (the subject of the last chapter), the effects of neoliberalism appear in the state’s exchange of a protected, more isolationist economy for one open to the vicissitudes of global commerce and private interest; the abandonment of social welfare policies for individualist, private reforms such as microcredit loans; the growing wealth gap between budding mega-cities and increasingly impoverished rural areas; and forms of flexible labor such as call center work that feed a Western but increasingly global market.

Still, neoliberalism is not only a set of social policies that is neocolonial in character. It is also a form of subjectivity and a political rationality created through discourses not always
related to a single state formation, but which give rise to the social policies described above. The
drive to treat both market and social spheres as firms and to see oneself and others not in
collective but in market terms—as sources of private investment and capital—is now a prevalent
form of subjectivity. Postcolonial Satire thus treats neoliberalism as more than the global elite’s
post-1970s response to Keynesian, post-war capitalism’s fall into recession and inflation, a
response that helped break the post-war empowerment of labor and rise in wages—both of which
threatened capital. Neoliberalism creates what Michel Foucault’s later work (1979) calls “homo
oeconomicus,” a form of rational choice individualism that renders subjects “entrepreneurs of
themselves” and marks capitalism’s transition from a “supermarket society” to an “enterprise
society” (147). This passage from the regulation of society by the market rather than the other
way around gives rise to a form of cynical, opportunistic subjectivity that jettisons collective
solutions to social problems. As we will see in chapters two through four, Postcolonial Satire
 refrains from treating neoliberalism according to a classical understanding of ideology, which
 posits that ideology works by hiding or distorting the truth of a subject’s relation to social reality
and the relations of production (what we know as Marx’s theory of ideology as “camera
obscura”).

This is because neoliberalism is a cynical political rationality insofar as it creates the
depoliticized, post-political subjects—whether resigned or opportunistic—it needs to function.
Neoliberalism is also cynical insofar as it anticipates the critique against it and absorbs the
political position of its opponent. The best example of this is neoliberalism’s move to celebrate a
weak form of multicultural politics in order to advance its own interests. It does so not out of a
commitment to social equality, but out of a recognition that accommodation to and
reappropriation of the major area of Left superstructural politics today—discrimination toward
identity and its overcoming via diversity initiatives and other pluralistic social policies—
becomes useful cover for a system increasingly immune to charges of racism, sexism,
homophobia, and the like because it actively fights those things culturally and institutionally, as
Disney, for example, famously does in its pro-gay stances on and off the screen, and across the
globe.\(^{10}\) Hence a major question *Postcolonial Satire* seeks to answer in its middle chapters: What
to do when identity politics and the positive image school of thinking now appear unable to
address a form of power that is multicultural and happy about it? What to do when the Old Left
appear less stodgy than correct when it frames identity politics as “both factionalizing and
depoliticizing, drawing attention away from the ravages of late capitalism toward superstructural
cultural accommodations that leave economic structures unchanged”? (Heyes).

Such suspicion toward identity-political moralism might appear restricted to a US
politics, but in fact resonates with a tradition of postcolonial thought against identity political
approaches. Hence Achille Mbembe, who frames nativism and nationalism in Africa as dead-end
forms of identity politics:

The first of these is what might be termed Afro-radicalism, with its baggage of
instrumentalism and political opportunism. The second is the burden of the
metaphysics of difference (nativism). The first current of thought—which liked to
present itself as “democratic,” “radical,” and “progressive”—used Marxist and
nationalist categories to develop an imaginaire of culture and politics in which a
manipulation of the rhetoric of autonomy, resistance, and emancipation serves as
the sole criterion for determining the legitimacy of an authentic African discourse.
The second current of thought developed out of an emphasis on the “native
condition.” It promoted the idea of a unique African identity founded on membership of the black race. (“African Modes” 240-1)

With this critique in mind, Mbembe argues that postcolonialists should separate the often blurred fields of social justice (praxis) and thought (theory)—precisely those categories that Brown also hopes to separate when she argues for “a mutually vitalizing distinction between political and intellectual life” (15). Mbembe’s consistent object of critique throughout his career has been what he sees as the victim politics inevitably intertwined with postcolonial identity politics, what he calls Africa’s “fixation on the past and this frenetic claim to the status of victim”—both of which he attributes to African nativism, Marxist-radicalism, and the vestiges of Negritude on the continent (35). This, at least, is Mbembe’s particular and context-specific iteration of his stance against postcolonial identity politics on the continent. Mbembe’s gripe with that politics is one all the authors discussed here share in one form or other.

Returning to Brown’s distinction between theory and practice for a moment: her most useful move when discussing the distinction between theory and politics is to emphasize what she sees as their productive difference and separation. As we will see, this difference will prove useful for discussing how, in terms of theory and praxis, cynical satire falls on the side of theory and for this reason troubles those critics for whom literature is and should be an extension of political activism (praxis).

For Brown, then, praxis (which she also calls the “political”) is a form of “discursive power” that functions by “concealing the terms of its fabrication and hence its malleability and contingency; discourse fixes meaning by naturalizing it, or else it ceases to have sway as discourse” (Politics 122). Thus, politics takes place by fixing meaning—much in the way that Achebe fixes the parameters of “truly” African art around its presumably natural correlation to
forms of political utility and action that are unambiguously normative. Theory, on the other hand, cannot for Brown “fix meaning in this political fashion without ceasing to be theoretical, without falling into empiricism, positivism, or doctrine. For theory to live … it must keep moving, it must keep taking critical distance from, and hence undoing, the terms of its objects … As politics does, theory undoes (123)." This call to undo the presumed necessity of theory to wed itself to praxis is also that of cynical postcolonial satire, which in many ways registers the poststructuralist turn in postcolonial studies by troubling and undoing many of categories that informed anticolonial thought. This is a non-remedial and even post-remedial form of critique that relinquishes belief in any one party-political stance or notion of reform. The satires examined here avoid the optimism and normativity inherent in the moral didacticism that demands the collapse of theory into praxis, as in Joseph E. Obi’s exemplary claim that Africa’s literature of disillusionment suffers from a “poverty of vision,” making it “[fall] short of the demands of critique,” by which he means that such literature does not enact a form of what he calls “proper criticism (i.e., criticism informed by a clearly worked out normative position) [that] replaces the object of critique with an alternative view” (400-1).

Such theoretical distinctions aside, there are at least two immediate senses in which Postcolonial Satire frames its discussion of cynicism as especially relevant at the time of writing. The first comes by way of an example of how cynicism remains an uninterrogated category in postcolonial thought. Instructive in this regard is a 2007 PMLA editor’s column that all but sounded the death knell for postcolonial studies. Entitled “The End of Postcolonial Theory?” the column posed the question “What is the status of postcolonial studies in the geopolitical present?” to a panel of distinguished scholars in the field, prompting a discussion weighted with the vocabulary of fatigue (Agani). “Exhaustion,” “despair,” “neglect,” and “pessimism”
resounded throughout as the conditions of a discipline whose objects of inquiry seem to have outgrown old practices and methodologies (634-9). While some came close to declaring the field moribund, all lamented the inability to connect “knowledge” with the “world” in the era of neoliberalism. Jennifer Wenzel comments that “the post-9/11 return to an expansionist, Manichean foreign policy [might] imply a failure of postcolonial studies” because that return to Manichean foreign policy suggests a growing and debilitating gap between “the state of the field and the state of the world” (633-4). Yet this gap, which the panel attributed to the difficulty of engaging in postcolonial critique in the age of neoliberalism, suggests much more than simply the failure to “keep up” on the part of scholars. What the hand-wrangling of the PMLA panelists reveals above all is the failure to understand the nature of cynical power in our postcolonial time.

Wenzel has this failure in mind when she cites a revealing 2004 discussion between a Bush administration official and a skeptical reporter accused of being in “the reality-based community”:

The [Bush official] said that guys like me were "in what we call the reality-based community," which he defined as people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. "That's not the way the world really works anymore," he continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality -- judiciously, as you will -- we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do. (Suskind “Faith, Certainty, and the Presidency of George W. Bush”)
Wenzel repurposes this “bald assertion of United States Empire” into a rallying cry for postcolonial studies to historicize imperialism more rigorously, assuming that tabling the field’s “depoliticizing celebrations of hybrid identities” combats a now self-aware empire. Here Wenzel hits on but mischaracterizes what she calls “a poststructuralist, postpostcolonial empire that is able to name the effects of its own naming” (634). For in the passage above the Bush official confirms Slavoj Zizek’s (1989) career-making insight: cynicism is today’s dominant form of ideology, one that works by presuming itself post-ideological. Cynicism, thus, puts to rest the old motto for false consciousness “they know not what they do,” for today it is more apparent than ever that “they very well know what they are doing, but still, they are doing it” (Zizek 25).

Cynical reason, then, is not “a direct position of immorality,” but rather “morality itself put in the service of immorality … confronted with illegal enrichment, with robbery, the cynical reaction consists in saying that legal enrichment is a lot more effective and, moreover, protected by the law” (26). *Postcolonial Satire* addresses the gap in postcolonial theory that has yet to articulate the how cynicism functions as a form of power today.

For as we will see in the final three chapters, the cynical reason described above is particular to neoliberalism, a political rationality that often frames itself as post-ideological. Hence David Cameron’s June 2010 explanation of his plan to cut public spending: “We are not doing this because we want to, driven by theory or ideology … We are doing this because we have to” (cited in Clarke and Newman). Here Cameron echoes Thatcher’s 2000 assertion that although “modern times have been plagued by ‘isms,’ in effect secular religions … I don’t regard Thatcherism as an ‘ism’ … if I ever invented an ideology that certainly wasn’t my intention” (qtd. in Hadley and Ho 6). When neoliberals frame themselves as post-ideological they naturalize neoliberalism’s hegemony, as do those who frame that economic system in Darwinian
naturalist terms—as an economic system that merely reflects humanity’s “natural” tendencies toward competition, self-interest, and hierarchy.

The post-ideological boastings of neoliberalism are, of course, nothing more than the self-privileging deceits of yet another capitalist ideology. But to identify and denounce this ideology as such is not enough, for a neoliberalism that thinks itself postideological is hard to distinguish from one that actually is. Here we might see another reason why supercultural forms of critique such as identity politics and the positive image school of thinking fail might fail to critique neoliberalism sufficiently. As we will see in chapters two and three, such forms of critique depend on an outmoded form of ideology critique wedded to the moralistic equivalence of ideological exposure with effectiveness, on the one hand, and of identity politics with resistance to neoliberalism, on the other. As Adolph Reed explains, the postideological pretensions of neoliberalism allow it to absorb the critiques against it, including that of identity politics:

Identity politics is not an alternative to class politics; it is a class politics, the politics of the left-wing of neoliberalism. It is the expression and active agency of a political order and moral economy in which capitalist market forces are treated as unassailable nature. An integral element of that moral economy is displacement of the critique of invidious outcomes produced by capitalist class power onto equally naturalized categories of ascriptive identity that sort us into groups defined by what we essentially are rather than what we do … Within that moral economy a society in which 1% of the population controlled 90% of the resources could be just, provided that roughly 12% of the 1% were black, 12% were Latino, 50% were women, and whatever the appropriate proportions were LGBT people.
It would be tough to imagine a normative ideal that expresses more unambiguously the social position of people who consider themselves candidates for inclusion in the ruling class (Reed).

Here Reed voices a cynicism toward diversity politics shared by Rushdie and Kureishi. He gestures toward the displacement mechanism of a neoliberalism that benefits from and reappropriates an identity politics that might draw attention away from neoliberalism’s systemic workings. And perhaps more nefariously, Reed suggests that the logic of a New Left identity politics insensitive to the class concerns of the Old Left is ultimately a neoliberal one.

Before turning to the first chapter, we should note the dearth of scholarship on postcolonial satire. For Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein, editors of the only anthology of essays on postcolonial satire to date, Cheeky Fictions: Laughter and the Postcolonial (2005), academic suspicion toward the mode emerges from the tension between marketing departments that “acknowledge and exploit laughter in postcolonial cultural production” and academic criticism, which “has been marked by a curious reluctance—a restraint verging on the pious—towards the functions of laughter” (2).

*Postcolonial Satire* reframes Riechl’s and Stein’s explanation for the lack of scholarship on the genre—what they call the field’s “piety”—with postcolonial moralism. If, as they argue, many scholars see the genre “as either slighting serious subject matter or simply indicating lighthearted entertainment,” this is less to do with a general feeling of piety and more with an aversion to a genre of writing that is purposely unclear in its politics (2). This approach to the genre echoes John Clement Ball’s argument that satire’s lack of formal cohesiveness convinces postcolonial scholars of its political impotence, its inability to formulate effective cultural critiques. (5).
Postcolonial criticism’s penchant for the dour and lack of attention toward satire seems to render the field at odds with what Dustin Griffin calls the perverse “pleasures of satire” (161). Insofar as satire often employs an objectifying gaze that misrepresents positions, indulges in stereotypes, and detaches itself from the subject at hand all for the sake of derision, the genre seems antithetical to a postcolonial establishment attuned to historical, contextual, and social complexity in a way that would reject such simplifications. And although that establishment often privileges social realism as a genre often equated to a more revolutionary politics, Laura Moss reminds us that a now prevalent critique of social realism from postcolonial circles indicts the genre not only as an extension of imperialist-capitalist ideology and a function of possessive individualism, but also “on the grounds that it lends itself to an imperializing function because it does not appear overtly to question the normalization and naturalization of otherness in its representation of the quotidian” (“The Plague of Normality”). However useful to piercing the presumed superiority of social realism in some postcolonial criticism, this is an incisive, if hasty, overgeneralization of a genre that may at times lend itself to an imperializing function, but not always.

What Postcolonial Satire hopes to avoid, then, is the urge to act as a spoilsport when it comes to the question of genre and what we expect of it. For Ball, the spoilsport of satire tends to misrepresent the satiric spirit … by defusing its aggressive energy—by seeking too zealously the conditions that satire may point to beyond its surface target to the extent of saying, in effect, that when any postcolonial author satirizes elements in his or her own society, he or she is really targeting the British or the Americans or the multinationals. (13).
When we frame postcolonial satire as always-already a critique of Empire and neocolonial initiation we miss how satire frames contemporary postcolonial politics in nuanced, complex terms that might help us exchange binary forms of thinking for what Stuart Hall calls “a politics of criticism,” which negotiates texts on a case-by-case basis untethered to any preexisting political desire (664).

Chapter one, “Chinua Achebe and the Beautiful Soul,” argues that Achebe’s No Longer at Ease (1960) satirizes the cynicism voiced by some of Nigeria’s anticolonial elites at the brink of a botched African independence. In the novel, Nigerian cynicism is derivatively western, born of literary modernism and Romanticism— traditions in which some of the anticolonial elite were trained. Hegel’s term for Romanticism’s morally sensitive yet ethically paralyzed protagonists, the “beautiful soul” also characterizes the alienated, self-acquitting sensibility of some postcolonial writers and their literary protagonists. By showing how African and European modernisms overlap in more ways than one, the chapter argues that “beautiful soul syndrome” might describe in helpful ways those African literary protagonists who struggle with intellectual brands of failed idealism in the face of modernity’s gaps of inadequately realized change.

Chapter two, “Left Moralism in Salman Rushdie’s The Satanic Verses,” moves from Achebe’s articulation and sendup of post-1945 African disillusionment to Salman Rushdie’s caricature of Thatcherism in The Satanic Verses (1988). Rushdie’s infamous text diagnoses Thatcher’s brand of capitalism as self-ironizing, cynical, and postmodern. The chapter focuses on a largely ignored portion of Rushdie’s novel—its satire of Britain’s shift from Keynes’s “dependency culture” to Thatcher’s “enterprise culture.” Citing Slavoj Zizek’s (1989) claim that cynicism is a dominant form of ideology today, the chapter discusses why it might no longer be possible to satirize those who, like Thatcher’s elite entrepreneurs, trumpet multiculturalism and
satirize themselves in advance. The chapter asks how we might reconceptualize issues of critique when objects of critique have already subsumed satire and irony in their self-presentation.

Chapter three, “Hanif Kureishi’s Stylish Nihilism,” develops Rushdie’s insight that global capitalism’s multiculturalism presents a problem to those that attempt to critique capitalism by trumpeting diversity and positive images of the marginalized. Kureishi’s film, *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), satirizes not only Thatcherite upstart culture among the Anglo-Pakistani middle class, but also the politics of positive images that demands heroic representations of the communities Thatcher marginalized. Such positive image politics motivate bell hooks’ infamous critique that Kureishi engages in “stylish nihilism,” by which she means that his work is less politically progressive than chicly apolitical; it indulges in a blasé pop aesthetic reminiscent of Quentin Tarantino’s films, which for hooks mark the triumph of style over substance, the loss of genuine politics to a postmodern lifestyle politics. *Laundrette* anticipates such critiques in advance, satirizing the Left for a didactic moralism that misses the critical function of Kureishi’s irony.

Chapter four, “Neoliberal Narrative in Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*,” reads Aravind Adiga’s parody of entrepreneurialism in globalizing India, *The White Tiger* (2008), as a parody of capitalist self-help narrative. The novels charts how a particular form of cynicism—misanthropic opportunism—destroys communalist paradigms in the developing world. Through parodic humor, the novel suggests that the biggest problem global capitalism poses to our era lies in its production of what Michel Foucault’s later work calls “homo oeconomicus,” a form of rational choice individualism that marks capitalism’s shift from a “supermarket society” to an “enterprise society.” The latter recasts the social field and morality according to the logic of the free market. The chapter encourages postcolonial scholars to nuance and repurpose Foucault’s
claim that neoliberalism creates a form of cynical subjectivity that discredits state-centered approaches to social welfare and does away with basic democratic values.


As a term that sutures these seemingly unrelated satires, cynical postcolonial satire provides a useful touchstone for connecting and discussing the often ignored function of satire in global Anglophone texts from the 1960s onward. The term connects widely different postcolonial texts via their performative critiques of political cynicism and their suspicion toward utopian political projects, especially to how these projects wed themselves to messianic and vindicationist rhetorics that may no longer convert the world-weary. As Scott reminds us, anticolonial idealists such as C.L.R. James used the narrative structure of the redemptive Romance strategically, hoping to catalyze anticolonial sentiment by using an attractive framework: world-historical redemption. But cynical satirists after decolonization witnessed the failure of these idealisms to come to fruition, catalyzing their equally strategic dystopic approach to political critique.

To date, only two book-length studies of postcolonial satire exist: Ball’s *Satire and the Postcolonial Novel* (2003), and Riechl’s and Stein’s edited collection *Cheeky Fictions: Laughter and the Postcolonial* (2005). Although I owe much to these texts, my work is the first to query why cynicism is the subgenre’s preferred idiom and object of critique, and how it manages to balance that strategic coupling of tone and genre.
 CHAPTER ONE

Chinua Achebe and the Beautiful Soul

“The ‘beautiful soul,’ lacking an actual existence, entangled in the contradiction between its pure self and the necessity of that self to externalize itself and change itself into an actual existence, and dwelling in the immediacy of this firmly held antithesis—an immediacy which alone is the middle term reconciling the antithesis, which has been intensified to its pure abstraction, and is pure being or empty nothingness—this ‘beautiful soul,’ then, being conscious of this contradiction in its unreconciled immediacy, is disordered to the point of madness, wastes itself in yearning and pines away in consumption.”

—Friedrich Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit

Born of a compensatory desire for purity, the beautiful soul is a self-ironizing figure that trumpets its authenticity—its inward delicacy of moral feeling and insight—against the outside world’s infectious corruption, degradation, and depravity. For Hegel, the concept names the immature manifestation of Spirit expressed in Romantic irony’s smug solipsism, embodied by that literary movement’s morally sensitive yet ethically paralyzed protagonists. As Timothy Morton describes it, beautiful soul syndrome (“BS for short”) describes a posh cynicism that thinks itself unpolluted and post-ideological, but which in its rationalized passivity essentially is the evil in the world it claims to see.

Hence Drew Milne’s characterization of beautiful soul syndrome as a tortured literary and authorial archetype, even a condition of modern writing itself:

The desire to have an inwardly determined quality of secular saintliness runs through the dissident delicacy often demanded of the modern writer. This demand is perhaps clearest in the way poets are called on to embody the conscience of secular society, serving up beautiful particularities of moral perception free of the weight of worldly complicity. Family resemblances to the unstable literary-philosophical compound represented by the beautiful soul can be recognized in the antiheroes of modernist literary representation (65-6).
Perhaps, though, Milne’s tracing of Romantic irony’s beautiful soul syndrome to modern authorship’s “self-legislating” disposition and modernist antiheroes does not apply to the case of Africa and its artists. Maybe to suggest as much only engages in the most banal of imperialisms: to render the continent’s cultural forms derivative, impure, lagging forever behind Europe’s modish avant-garde.

But as Ato Quayson reminds us, African and European modernisms constitutively overlap in more ways than one—a case in point being Soyinka’s *The Interpreters*, which as many African texts of disillusionment do, thematizes the intellectual’s self-consciousness, anomie, and accountability as these relate to the wider community. Beautiful soul syndrome, then, might describe in helpful ways those African literary protagonists who—whether or not they echo their authorial doppelgängers—struggle with brands of self-loathing and self-absolution in the face of modernity’s gaps of inadequately realized change.

This chapter revisits Achebe’s exemplary satire of African disillusionment, *No Longer at Ease* (1960). Published the year of Nigeria’s official independence from Britain, the novel describes how Obi Okonkwo, a civil servant and colonial subject, tries but fails at the threshold of independence to navigate a Nigerian modernity overrun with cultures of bribery, nepotism, and tribalism. Torn between the moral and financial demands of his rural, traditionalist kin and those of the colony’s urban elite, Obi succumbs to corruption, voicing his downfall and Nigeria’s botched independence through a sardonic self-acquittal. As Neil Lazarus reminds us, many African intellectuals and writers during the anticolonial era were “predisposed to a messianic and middle-class specific conception of decolonization as a revolutionary process,” a conception that led them to “overvalue the emancipatory significance of independence,” catalyzing their quick descent into self-loathing and self-acquitting pessimisms (*Resistance* ix). A frustrated idealist
betrayed by the high promises of anticolonialism, Obi mirrors such a lost generation of African writers and intellectuals, figures the novel satirizes for their self-absolving cynicism.

I

No Longer at Ease takes place in late 1950s Nigeria and tells the story of Obi Okonkwo, grandson of the tragic hero of Things Fall Apart. A “been to,” Obi travels to England where he receives a degree in English—he specializes in Joseph Conrad, T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden, Evelyn Waugh, and Graham Greene—and returns home a firebrand cultural nationalist alienated from traditionalist friends, family, and the Umuofia Progressive Union (UPU), the hometown association whose members “taxed themselves mercilessly” in order to fund Obi’s education, and who expect him to take a senior civil service position in the capital city of Lagos so as to benefit himself and further the interests of the UPU. The novel begins and ends with Obi’s fall from grace—he is on trial for bribery, which is normalized in colonial Nigeria but still prosecuted to set nominal examples—and asks how an idealistic, “young man of … education and brilliant promise could have done this” (159). It ends with the third-person omniscient narrator’s skeptical, blasé refrain that no one could “comprehend how an educated man and so on and so forth” (159).

Obi’s beautiful soul begins from his botched—and comic-tragically derivative—idealism toward decolonization, one he crafts as a colonial subject studying in England: “The Nigeria he returned to was in many ways different from the picture he had carried in his mind during those four years [studying English in Britain]. There were many things he could no longer recognize, and others—like the slums of Lagos—which he was seeing for the first time” (19). Obi’s is no routine spell of defamiliarization caused by his trip to the infrastructurally developed empire, but
rather an occasion for him to engage in hackneyed moralisms based on little else than quixotic
musings about his homeland (“It was in England that Nigeria became more than just a name for
him. That was the first great thing England did for him”). Hence Obi’s decision upon his return
to urban Nigeria to moralize about “a wide-open storm drain from which came a very strong
smell of rotting flesh”:

Here was Lagos, thought Obi, the real Lagos he hadn’t imagined existed until
now. During his first winter in England he had written a callow, nostalgic poem
about Nigeria. It wasn’t about Lagos in particular, but Lagos was part of the
Nigeria he had in mind.

‘How sweet it is to lie beneath a tree
At eventime and share the ecstasy
Of jocund birds and flimsy butterflies;
How sweet to leave our earthbound body in the mud,
And rise towards the music of the spheres,
Descending softly with the wind,
And the tender glow of the fading sun’

He recalled the poem and then turned and looked at the rotting dog in the storm
drain and smiled. ‘I have tasted putrid flesh in the spoon,” he said through
clenched teeth. ‘Far more apt”” (23).

Obi’s admission that he has been mugged by Nigerian reality (“here was … the real Lagos”)
depends on a trite British pastoralism that denounces the corruption and complexity of city life.
Pastoralism proves an apt genre for Obi’s misanthropy, for its impossible idealism expresses an
elite, misanthropic disdain of the non-idyllic urban. Obi also parrots high-modernism’s most
beautiful soul, J. Alfred Prufrock, recasting the latter’s lament against the banality of modern
bourgeois life (“I have measured out my life in coffee spoons,”) into a scatological idiom that
exonerates the sensitive and chicly disenchanted over and against the inured, naïve native.
But when seen outside of Obi’s narcissism the scatological scene above tells an entirely different story. Before waxing pastoral, Obi notices how a child near the storm drain argues with a passing nightsoil man, causing nearby workers to “burst into laughter” and even the nightsoil worker to “smile” and “go his way, having said something very rude about the boy’s mother” (22-3). Here Nigeria’s marginalized see their less-than-ideal surroundings not as the primal scene of their social decay, but as the banal backdrop to their survival and everyday life and moments of laughter. When Obi renders Lagos an occasion to lament the “fallen” African condition, he renders laughter-as-agency into laughter-as-resignation. As the real object of critique in the passage, Obi is the source of the cynicism he attributes to African locals. Through an irony that renders Obi the satirist satirized, the beautiful soul authors the fatalism he laments.

Obi’s excremental idiom positions westerners as futuristic figures of retention, purity, sensitivity, and organization over and against retrograde natives framed as incontinent, polluted, insensitive, and disordered. For Warwick Anderson, such colonial-era binaries helped build “corporeal distinctions between colonizers and colonized,” painting the latter as promiscuous defecators who “lacked the self-control characteristic of white men, and therefore required guidance toward self-government of body and polity” (169). In this way, Obi mimics colonialism’s beautiful obsession with the bodily waste of the colonized. He misappropriates shit as a sign of Nigeria’s civilizational and attitudinal failure, condemning natives for their acclimation to excreta, for him the primordial sign of the colony’s incorrigible barbarity.

Notice, too, the classically colonialist tension between Obi—a individuated, sensitive, and alienated aesthete schooled in western cynicism—and African locals figured here and elsewhere in the novel as undivided natives still tied organically to tradition and inured to poverty and harsh surroundings. When Neil ten Kortenaar explains this binary we see how
beautiful soul syndrome functions as a colonial missionary moralism: “Europeans believe that, while other peoples are as yet undivided and therefore, to an extent, innocent, they themselves, precisely because they are alienated from their essential selves, from the world, and from community with others, feel the truth of fallen humanity most deeply” (84). For the fallen colonist, the native symbolizes not only a beautiful soul deserving of admiration and education, but also an occasion to render colonialism a beautifully redemptive, moral enterprise. In response to the charmingly undivided and ignorant native, the heroically anguished colonizer engages in the noble, self-sacrificial act of saving his unenlightened brethren.

Obi’s failed idealism thus takes its cue from colonialism’s. We see this when Obi meditates on what drives his boss, Mr. Green, to keep working diligently in his civil service post despite the “failure” of colonization to civilize the native. Here Obi recreates Marlow’s ponderings on Kurtz as a failed missionary:

Here was a man [Mr. Green] who did not believe in a country, and yet worked so hard for it. Did he simply believe in duty as a logical necessity? […] He must have come originally with an ideal—to bring light to the heart of darkness … But when he arrived Africa played him false. Where was his beloved bush full of human sacrifice? … With a flash of insight Obi remembered his Conrad which he had read for his degree. ‘By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded.’ That was Kurtz before the darkness got him. Afterwards he had written: ‘Exterminate all the brutes’ (102-3).

Here Obi uses Green and Kurtz as objects of transference to express his unfulfilled idealism upon returning to Nigeria, his own Kurtz-like struggle, but in reverse. For Obi, Green’s frustrated optimism lies in his unsatisfied white colonial’s burden, a burden aggravated into a misanthropy
he expresses throughout the novel in colonial-era truisms about Nigerians, truisms Obi likens to Kurtz’s call to “exterminate all the brutes.” Green’s—like Obi’s—is a colonial idealism frustrated by the gap between the redemptive Africa of the colonial imagination and an Africa that “played him false,” that failed to redeem the beautifully fallen colonizer and that undercut the naïve faith that replacing “old Africans” accustomed to corruption with “new,” European-educated Africans with “higher ideals” would change things for the better.

Still, Obi’s is not only the resigned cynicism of an enlightened false consciousness. His is also the delicate—and colonial-style—cynicism of the self-exonerating elite. We see this when, on the way from urban Lagos to visit rural Umuofia, Obi witnesses his driver attempt to bribe two policemen during a routine stop. Refusing to look away from the transaction as other passengers do, Obi frightens the policemen away, only postponing the bribe until a quarter mile later—but this time with a much steeper price demanded by the off-put officers. Angered by Obi’s misplaced, melodramatic sense of morality concerning this most banal of inconveniences—the working-class passengers call him a “too know” young man and one of the “book people”—the driver and other lorry passengers snub Obi for the rest of the journey, prompting him to condemn in the mode of colonial exasperation what to his mind are Africa’s hopelessly callous and morally tarnished masses:

‘What an Augean stable!’ he muttered to himself. ‘Where does one begin? With the masses? Educate the masses? He shook his head. ‘Not a chance there. It would take centuries. A handful of men at the top. Or even one man with a vision—an enlightened dictator. People are scared of the word nowadays. But what kind of democracy can exist side by side with so much corruption and ignorance? Perhaps
a halfway house—a sort of compromise.’ When Obi’s reasoning reached this point he reminded himself that England had been corrupt not so long ago (47-8). Augean stables—places marked by corruption and filth, alluding to the Greek myth where King Augeus houses 3000 unclean oxen for thirty years until Hercules redirects the river Alpheus and cleans them in a single day—tell us more about Obi’s fascist, totalitarian sensibilities than anything about the masses he bitterly denounces. Here Obi voices how the beautiful soul exempts himself from and then individualizes and personalizes systemic issues—in this case, the normalization of Nigerian corruption among the masses, attributing those phenomena to its greatest victims in order to justify an elitist vision of the Nigerian political order, one based on a colonialist time lag between peripheral colonies and imperial metropoles (“England had been corrupt not so long ago”).

Obi’s self-vindicating sense of isolation here and elsewhere in the novel suggests why, as Kofi Owuso notes, he “feels a certain emotional affinity with Shakespeare’s Hamlet.” But this affinity is less poetic than tragically horrifying. Having written a letter in sympathy to Hitler in his youth, but no longer able to remember exactly why he did so, Obi at one point asks himself, “What was Hitler to me or I to Hitler?” providing “a variation on Hamlet’s ‘What’s Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba/ That he should weep for her?’” (41; 462). Owuso offers the useful reading that both figures “feel no longer at ease in societies that are corrupt and corrupting” (41). But Obi’s sympathy for the Nazi devil takes on a much more portentous meaning when paired alongside H.S. Harris’s reminder that “Hitler saw himself, and was seen by some of his admirers, as a ‘Beautiful Soul’” (483). This link clarifies Morton’s claim that the beautiful soul is essentially the evil in the world it claims to see, for as he says elsewhere in another nod to Hegel, ideas and ideologies always come bundled with attitudes and dispositions,
and vice versa. Such bundling suggests that the beautiful soul’s cynicism—and the self-righteous, moralistic idiom in which the beautiful express that cynicism—emerges from a compensatory and ultimately colonial investment in a brutally solipsistic portrait of social reality.

In this way, Obi’s beautiful soul syndrome doubles as his blind spot: a constitutive porousness to the socius, which is threatening because outside the possessive-individualist logic of autonomy, control, and purity. As a beautiful cynic, then, Obi overlooks the role of the observer in constructing his object of analysis, and it is precisely in this sense that he expresses one of the beautiful soul’s most debilitating, dangerous qualities—its self-privileging fantasy of total knowledge, its treacherous certainty. He presumes himself post-ideological, that his jadedness renders him an omniscient subject accountable only to a private morality that abnegates the socius.

Such a private morality, after all, appears attractive and even reasonable insofar as the beauty of Obi’s disillusioned soul—its allure as an uncontaminated subject position in a seemingly compromised and compromising world—is at least two-fold. Indeed, Obi is, for at least a short time, successful not only in his early commitment to shun bribes and thus avoid a culture of graft, but also in his resolute desire to marry Clara, an osu (a member of an untouchable caste). Obi’s symbolic desire to marry an osu gestures toward a more fulfilling, egalitarian vision of New Nigerian unity, rendering understandable his alienation from the traditionalist UPU, who culturally and financially pressure Obi to avoid marrying Clara lest he contaminate Umuofians and undercut the UPU as a socially homogeneous, tribalist institution. To Obi—whose beautiful soul often takes to task and plays off of the UPU’s traditionalism and self-interest—that organization only helps perpetuate a caste system tied vestigially to external
and autochthonous traditions of slavery on the continent—traditions that for Obi are better removed from the idealistic New Nigeria he envisions but is incapable of involving himself in.\textsuperscript{20}

\section*{II}

Thus the novel has other targets besides Obi’s beautiful cynicism and its ties to colonial moralism—namely, its late colonial setting and the material and cultural institutions it births: A Nigeria engrossed in western materialism, self-interest, and a tribalism born of the colonial carving up of the continent. During Obi’s return celebration an elder notes a drastic shift in Igbo values since the days of \textit{Things Fall Apart}: “Today greatness has changed its tune. Titles are no longer great, neither are barns or large numbers of wives and children. Greatness is now in the things of the white man. And so we too have changed our tune. We are the first in all the nine villages to send our son to the white man’s land” (57). Alongside such assimilation comes western aesthetic and materialist predilections grafted onto forms of tribal favoritism and normalized nepotism, a case in point being the judgment against Obi’s populist decision to give his reception speech in “shirtsleeves” even though “[e]veryone was properly dressed in \textit{aghada} or European suit except the guest of honor … [and] [e]verybody expected a young man from England to be impressively turned out” (36).

Despite Obi’s recourse to populism here, the narrator deems this Obi’s “mistake Number One” (36). His second stems from his decision to “speak is and was” rather than the stilted, prolix English the hometown expects of a European-educated African (37). Instead, Obi uses a “most unimpressive” cultural-nationalist idiom that falls on deaf ears: “Education is for service [to Nigeria’s progress and unity], not for white collar jobs and comfortable salaries”; but the latter is precisely what the UPU demands—especially the trappings of “the kind of English they admired if not understood: the kind that filled the mouth, like the proverbial dry meat” (37).
Meanwhile upon Obi’s return the leader of UPU, who mixes Nigerian cultural nationalism with the language of material self-interest, describes how although the “importance of having one of our sons in the vanguard of this march of progress is nothing short of axiomatic” because evidence of national progress, the real reason to celebrate Obi’s arrival is that: ‘‘Ours is ours, but mine is mine.’ Every town and village struggles at this momentous epoch in our political evolution to possess that of which it can say: ‘This is mine.’ We are happy that today we have such an invaluable possession” (37).

The passages above satirize the UPU not only for its unabashed malfeasance, but also for impeding national development and aggravating the nation’s urban-rural divide. In the UPU’s decision to fund Obi’s education in law, Tejumola Olaniyan identifies a provincialism that undercuts the collective-nationalist cry for democratic unity: after all, the UPU needs lawyers primarily to “handle all their land cases against their neighbors”—that is, to engage less in the protection of native lands from colonial forces eager to dig roots before leaving and more in the “private appropriation and alienation” of adjacent, aboriginal land owned by native competitors scrambling for scant resources (51). And although the UPU claims to represent all Umuofians equally, those closer to Lagos—the urban elite—reap the largest benefit from the UPU’s taxes, spending, and gains because closer to sources of upward mobility.

Here we see the novel’s satire of the UPU’s unscrupulous cynicism, which is distinct from Obi’s refined jadedness. While Obi’s cynicism is that of the beautiful soul’s self-undercutting belief that his contemptuous separation from the world translates into the only effective ethics possible in a time of corruption and moral laxity, the UPU’s cynicism is that of a pure self-interest that has no higher moral calling yet proclaims itself communalist. Upon his initial return to rural Umuofia, for example, Obi notices how his esteemed “father … was all
bones, although he did not look nearly as bad as his mother. It was clear to Obi that they did not have enough good food to eat. It was scandalous, he thought, that after thirty years’ service in the church his father should retire on a salary of two pounds a month, a good slice of which went back to the same church by way of class fees and other contributions” (57-8). At first blush, Obi’s frail parents appear to be victims only of colonial Christianity’s deleterious, residual presence in Nigeria. But we should recall that this is not the only source of their poverty. For recall how the UPU members, who could hardly afford it, “taxed themselves mercilessly” in order to fund Obi’s education, expecting their investment to pay off in ways that will benefit the hometown as a whole, but which inevitably aid the organization’s aspiring, urban-based elites. Hence the irony: Obi’s esteemed parents and, indeed, most of the rural village, suffer more than ever from acute forms of poverty, showing how the organization’s elitism belies its communalist taglines.21

In this way, the novel satirizes the UPU as a cynically self-interested institution born of—and ironically still wedded to—the colonial state’s abandonment of the rural. For some, such institutions provide necessary bulwarks against the complete incursion of state power into rural areas. And they are not entirely wrong in this regard. Indeed, in one view hometown associations represent radical forms of mobilization against the colonial state regime—but they were and are, for that very reason, often captured by the state and its prevailing logics. So although there are less skeptical ways of viewing the hometown association and its beginnings as a self-help institution born in response to the scarcity produced under colonial administration in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa,22 we should note Joel D. Barkan et. al.’s “Shadow State” interpretation of the phenomenon, which is where hometown associations function as “instruments of state manipulation and the effort to involve large numbers of citizens in community action and
volunteer activities is seen as a cynical move by political elites to shift the burden of social welfare costs to private organizations and local institutions” (459). This view is instructive insofar as Achebe’s novel takes place in a Nigerian modernity where cynicisms of all stripes operate—and understandably so. It is a time and place where “the government was they. It had nothing to do with you or me. It was an alien institution and the people’s business was to get as much from it as they could without getting into trouble” (38).

Useful here is Olaniyan, who notes how Umuofians in the text declare their separation from Nigeria’s national struggle and cultural identity. The UPU’s Umuofians, after all, do not consider themselves traditional Nigerians, but rather natives of a higher moral standing and different ethnicity—as “sojourners” within Nigeria (12). As a revered member of the UPU puts it, “‘We are strangers in this land. If good comes to it may we have our share.’ Amen. ‘But if bad comes let it go to the owners of the land who know what gods should be appeased.’ Amen”’ (14).

Against Obi’s early investment in cultural nationalism, and later his brand of refined self-exemption, we find an association with its own distinct brand of self-undercutting cynicism at the threshold of decolonization—one the novel play’s off of Obi’s to satirical effect.

Thus the novel’s ironic use of Igbo proverbs to show how the UPU instrumentalizes traditional idioms known for their communalist ethos and moral function. When trying to explain Obi’s predicament while on trial, the president of the UPU argues that “it was a thing of shame for a man in the senior service to go to prison for twenty pounds. He repeated twenty pounds, spitting it out. ‘I am against people reaping where they have not sown. But we have a saying that if you want to eat a toad you should look for a fat and juicy one’” (13). Yet another member follows this sentiment by recounting how it was “‘all lack of experience … He should not have accepted the money himself … Obi tried to do that everyone does without finding out how it was
done.’ He told the proverb of the house rat who went swimming with his friend the lizard and died from cold, for while the lizard’s scales kept him dry the rat’s hairy body remained wet” (14). All of these are uttered, too, under the aegis of the UPU’s self-interested participation in a culture of bribery that they individualize to their own ends: For them, “Obi was without doubt, a very foolish and self-willed young man,” which is to say that his predicaments and ethical paralysis stem from an private failure to get with the program and move beyond his misplaced scruples, not from the culture of graft of which the UPU is a part (43).

Hence Achebe’s systemic critique not only of Obi’s debilitating attempt to separate himself from what he sees as a debased and debasing New Nigeria, but also of a civil society institution often praised for its traditionalism and communalism. For such an institution would at first blush seem a properly populist-political response to an abnegating subject position such as Obi’s, rather than, as Achebe suggests and Jon Soske argues, potentially an example of how African “tribal institutions in their modern form are the product of colonial rule” and its not so egalitarian logics (50).

III

Achebe’s novel, then, satirizes not only the ineffectuality of the beautiful soul’s refined anomie alongside at least one falsely populist institution born under colonial rule, but also cynicism and moralism as widespread (though always differently articulated) responses to failed political visions. Perhaps, the novel suggests, cynicism functions a systemic condition a la Mbembe’s claim that power works “convivially,” encircling subjects under the same unconscious, mutually disempowering episteme.23 This approach to power—and more particularly to the spread and function of cynicism among disenchanted anticolonials—avoids facile distinctions between victims and victimizers, oppression and resistance, challenging the
beautiful soul’s self-exempting politics of blame while asking us to exchange morality and moralism for ethics and implication. Here we see a desire to change the terms, attitudes, and approaches of contemporary critique—from a sanctimony premised on the politics of outrage, guilt, and absolution to an ethics that stresses messiness, interdependence, and association. This desire, in turn, puts into question the slew of vitriolic criticism against Africa’s literature of disillusionment as a literature of elitist, western-style fatalism that advocates for rather than critiques such fatalism—what, somewhat ironically, Achebe himself in his well-known harangue against Ayi Kwei Armah, saw as a politically irresponsible form of modernist navel gazing.24

Thus, the novel suggests, the joke on Obi is also on the moralist. For in order to critique but not recreate the beautiful soul’s pretension to ethical purity, one should avoid moralizing against moralism, even if such moralism does not abnegate the socius as Obi’s does.25 Instructive in this regard is the novel’s last paragraph, which leaves us not with a prescriptive mandate or moral in the New Nigeria’s time of uncertainty and transition, but rather with a skepticism that resists easy answers: “Everybody wondered why. The learned judge, as we have seen, could not comprehend how an educated man and so on and so forth. The British council man, even the men of Umuofia, did not know. And we must presume that, in spite of his certitude, Mr. Green did not know either” (159). Here the novel asks us to avoid the self-righteous punitiveness that Mr. Green, Obi, and the UPU, however differently, deploy throughout the novel.

If, as Obi at one point muses regarding his understandable feelings of impotence and frustration at the verge of independence, “If one didn’t laugh, one would have to cry. It seemed that was the way Nigeria was built,” then we should take seriously how the novel critiques yet carefully avoids recreating beautiful soul syndrome and its Manichean politics of blame (112). For if we think of Achebe’s satirical fiction as he does—as an attempt to help Africa “regain
belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement”—then we might include among those complexes a beautiful cynicism that recapitulates yet another colonial shibboleth we can do without.
CHAPTER TWO

Left Moralism in Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*

‘The thing that's so amazing about her is the size of what she's trying to do.’ Her? … [Saladin] Chamcha was confused. ‘I'm talking about you-know-who,’ [Hal] Valance explained helpfully. ‘Torture. Maggie the Bitch.’ Oh. ‘She's radical all right. What she wants—what she actually thinks she can fucking achieve—is literally to invent a whole goddamn new middle class in this country. Get rid of the old woolly incompetent buggers from fucking Surrey and Hampshire, and bring in the new. People without background, without history. Hungry people. People who really want, and who know that with her, they can bloody well get. Nobody's ever tried to replace a whole fucking class before, and the amazing thing is she might just do it if they don't get her first. The old class. The dead men. You follow what I'm saying.' ‘I think so,’ Chamcha lied. ‘And it's not just the businessmen,’ Valance said slurrily. ‘The intellectuals, too. Out with the whole faggoty crew. In with the hungry guys with the wrong education. New professors, new painters, the lot. It's a bloody revolution. Newness coming into this country that's stuffed full of fucking old corpses. It's going to be something to see. It already is.’

—*The Satanic Verses*, 269-70

In the epigraph above Hal Valence voices the cynical political reason behind Margaret Thatcher’s brand of neoliberalism. One of Thatcher’s yuppie entrepreneurs, Hal describes the prime minister’s creed of unabashed self-interest with affection and awe, with genuine wonder for her vision of a ruthlessly capitalist Britain. Saladin Chamcha’s repeated confusion and incomprehension are crucial here, marking as they do his—and, indeed, perhaps our—failure to grasp an economic-moral vision that redescribes reality via “new professors, new painters,” and so no longer cloaks itself in the conservative ideologies of old. Even more frightening is that vision’s promise of a posthistorical Britain, one that valorizes the marginalized so long as they remain “without background, without history,” enthralled by the voracity of a system that replaces “the old class” by enforcing historical amnesia toward the imperial past and brutal calculation toward the capitalist future.

Hal epitomizes a larger-than-life stereotype of a British neoliberalism that declares itself, as many neoliberals famously do, post-ideological; he presages Thatcher’s declaration that although “modern times have been plagued by ‘isms,’ in effect secular religions … I don’t regard Thatcherism as an ‘ism’ … if I ever invented an ideology that certainly wasn’t my intention”
(qtd. in Hadley and Ho 6). Having called herself a “conservative revolutionary” throughout her political career, Thatcher here reveals the hypocrisy behind her self-account in more ways than one. But what if, rather than seeing her aversion toward “isms” as evidence of her cynical dishonesty, as evidence of neoliberalism’s attempt to cover its own tracks, we take her at her word? What if we agree that Thatcher was indeed the poster child for an actually post-ideological neoliberalism?

At first blush, doing so seems to endorse historical amnesia, if not outright revisionism. Consider the sound bites, commercials, and agitprop created by the New Right since the mid-70s, which were often brainstormed by such neoliberal think tanks as The Heritage Foundation and The Institute for Economic Affairs (IEA). What was such popularly disseminated propaganda if not ideology *par excellence?* Alongside Ronald Reagan, Thatcher was a self-proclaimed pragmatist and “conviction politician” who helped the New Right shift its rhetoric, image, and policies toward the moralistic, earnest, and anti-cynical. This common sense understanding of Thatcher’s legacy is precisely why Rushdie’s Hal proves so interesting, for his barefaced instrumentalism, calculating ethos, and self-ironizing gaze openly contradict the British “moral majority’s” self-portrayal, invoking a political scene altogether removed from the question of the ideology of conservative morality. Hal speaks the taglines of the jaundiced and opportunistic neoliberalism these British moralists championed; this is disorienting insofar as the relation between these political rationalities seems a commonsensical one: neoconservativism, working in the realm of ideas (superstructure), obscures neoliberalism’s economic workings (base). This view invokes a traditional understanding of ideology qua Marx’s “camera obscura.”

But Hal flips the inverted camera back right side up. *He deceives by means of the truth itself.* This is why Chamcha is at such a loss in the passage above. For as Zizek argues in his
formulation of cynicism as today’s dominant ideology, “in a universe in which all are looking for the true face beneath the mask, the best way to lead them astray is to wear the mask of truth itself” (42). Hal, then, poses a challenge to ideology critique itself, warning those who would challenge neoliberalism on the now shop-worn terrain of unmasking false consciousness that unmasking no longer works because the emperor has no clothes, but he is happy to parade naked (41). As “the personification of philistine triumphalism … one of the greatest glories of the age … [who] made much of his ‘intimate’ association with the Prime Minister he referred to affectionately as ‘Mrs. Torture,’” Hal embodies late capitalist cynicism. For Hal the failure of grand narratives engenders the space necessary to fashion oneself into a self-satisfied opportunist, to construct “a pure, self-created image, a set of attributes plastered thickly over a body that was, in Hal’s own words, ‘in training to be Orson Welles’” (266). Hal’s is a smugly technocratic worldview indifferent to grand narratives and their promise of metaphysical coherence. In a novel that satirizes all stripes of fundamentalism—from Christian-creationist, Islamic, English-racist, Hindu-nationalist, black-nationalist, to linguistic-purist—Hal’s vision of a postpolitical, postideological, and postmodern British society proves a tricky target for criticism. This seems especially true given the focus of most criticism of The Verses, which sweeps this satire of Thatcherism under the rug, usually (and not surprisingly) in favor of emphasizing either the fatwa-inducing passages or deconstructions of the modern subject that over the past twenty-five years have come to define the novel as a whole.

So what if we took Hal—and thus Thatcher—at his word? Perhaps then we could better understand how the novel’s much acclaimed excursions on the postcolonial condition as a quintessentially postmodern one also applies to its diagnosis of Thatcher’s neoliberalism as a cynical political rationality, not an ideology qua false consciousness. After refusing to give
Chamcha his job back as a TV actor and voice-over specialist, Hal ends their last conversation with a hauteur that distinguishes Thatcher’s neoliberalism from its bourgeois-moralist predecessor:

‘Time you were off, Chamcha … On Sunday afternoons [my Wife and I] go to bed and watch pornography on video. It’s a whole new world, Saladin. Everybody has to join sometime.’

No compromises. You're in or you're dead. It hadn't been Chamcha's way; not his, nor that of the England he had idolized and come to conquer. He should have understood then and there: he was being given, had been given, fair warning.

And now the coup de grace. ‘No hard feelings,’ Valance was murmuring into his ear. ‘See you around, eh? Okay, right.’

‘Hal,’ he made himself object, ‘I've got a contract.’

Like a goat to the slaughter. The voice in his ear was now openly amused [my emphasis]. ‘Don't be silly,’ it told him. ‘Of course you haven't. Read the small print. Get a lawyer to read the small print. Take me to court. Do what you have to do. It's nothing to me. Don't you get it? You're history.’ (270)

Here Britain’s pornography-watching couples—their libidos turned inwardly, away from their adjacent others—epitomize Thatcher’s solipsistic and vulgar “new world,” one whose brutal self-interest runs roughshod over the moralisms and proceduralisms of Britain’s imperial past. Little wonder that the Anglophilic, traditionalist Chamcha, unable to comprehend a pitiless England he no longer recognizes, muses in self-pity: “Had he not … sought to become that which he most admired, dedicated himself … to the conquest of Englishness? Had he not worked hard, avoided
trouble, striven to become new? Assiduity, fastidiousness, moderation, restraint, self-reliance, probity, family life: what did these add up to if not a moral code? Could it be, in this inverted age, that he was being victimized ... precisely because of his pursuit of the good?” (257). We would be wrong to see this lament as critical only of British assimilationism. For in Thatcher’s “inverted age,” where the cheeky Hal reigns supreme, more is at stake here than English moralism’s fading veneer. Hal’s open amusement toward Chamcha’s woefully frank “moral code” epitomizes neoliberalism’s flagrant indifference toward its sincere, Keynesian forbearers. Hal’s is a political rationality proudly unmoved by ideologies and masks of bourgeois respectability, wary enough to know that the best way to cover malfeasance today is through open indiscretion, and conscious that the best way to swindle is not through deception, but by establishing a new morality.

What do Hal and others like him in the novel tell us about Thatcherism as a form of cynical reason? How do these figures voice Rushdie’s satirical style? The novel satirizes the failure of moralism as a rhetorical and political strategy to oppose neoliberalism and its entrepreneurial agents, those cynical figures who drove Thatcher’s infamous quest to replace Britain’s “dependency culture” with “enterprise culture.” If, as in the novel, some of Thatcher’s victims opposed their abusers through a reactionary identity politics that cohered around traditional notions of ideology, then for SV they missed the mark insofar as cynical reason is always-already one step ahead of ideology critique. Cynical reason is immune to the unmasking of false consciousness because the neoliberal subject today harbors what Peter Sloterdijk calls enlightened false consciousness, “that modernized, unhappy consciousness, on which enlightenment has labored both successfully and in vain ... this consciousness no longer feels affected by any critique of ideology” (4). Notice the lesson of enlightened false consciousness:
When distortion is no longer a goal and method of power, the strategy of unmasking loses purchase. Even so, this does not mean that we live in postideological times. When we think this, we fall precisely into trap cynicism sets for us, for as Wendy Brown notes, neoliberalism operates as a political rationality that “governs the sayable, the intelligible, and the truth criteria of these domains,” not as an ideology that distorts reality (69).29

For all the reasons above, moralism fails to address, and actually re-entrenches, cynical reason: its dogmatic self-certainty, quest for purity, and punitiveness (all born from a sense of victimization) fuel the cycles of cynicism and moralism rampant in the political world today.30 When we moralize we fall into what Louis Althusser called “the ideology of ideology,” the postulation of an all-too-easy causality between internal belief and external action. The ideology of ideology asks us “to recognize that every ‘subject’ endowed with a ‘consciousness’ and believing in the ‘ideas’ that his ‘consciousness’ inspires in him and freely accepts, must ‘act according to his ideas’, must therefore inscribe his own ideas as a free subject in the actions of his material practice. If he does not do so, ‘that is wicked’” (“Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”). No wonder moralism is so detrimental to the disempowered: it sells finger-wagging as resistance, personifying systemic oppression in utterances and individuals while reducing politics to a game of individual preference (as does capitalism). In so doing, moralism alienates both adherents and would-be allies, legitimates ressentiment in politics, squashes political imagination, reifies political logics unable to account for new logics of coercion and power, and entrenches the disaffection and opportunism neoliberalism feeds and depends upon. Because restricted to the righteous task of unmasking its falsely conscious opponent—rather than converting and persuading that opponent—moralism creates an Us vs Them dynamic that obfuscates neoliberalism’s modus operandi: to cast the political field and its subjects under the
free market’s ruthless, antipolitical logic, whose strength lies in anticipating the critique against it. By inculcating a jaundiced apoliticism as the normative structure of thinking and acting today, neoliberalism squashes alternative social visions in a way solidified by the Left’s righteous, humorless, alienating, and unimaginative desire to punish those who do not toe the party line.

The cycles of moralism and cynicism (often indistinguishable) that SV satirizes also characterizes the text’s outside, known as “the Rushdie Affair.” Besides debating the charges of blasphemy levied against Rushdie, the affair questioned the role and value of satire. As James F. English argues, “despite the very specific charges of blasphemy … it may be fair to say that the Verses affair has less to do with content than with questions of tone or modality. The humor is the real problem: it is not that Rushdie wrote objectionable things, but that he wrote them with a smirk on his face” (229; my emphasis). But smirking was precisely the point. If, as Brown argues, “it is when the telos of the good vanishes but the yearning for it remains that morality seems to devolve into moralism in politics,” then the Verses attempted to break the Left esprit de sérieux that speeds the descent from morality to moralism, offering an affirmative, nonmoralistic rhetoric particularly useful to our jaded age (28). Moralism is antipolitical because unconcerned with convincing, with fashioning rhetorical forms and dispositions better suited to persuade during disenchanted times. By demanding that we engage in self-serving dogmatisms rather than in the difficult and dialectical task of democratic deliberation, moralism hardens egos, creating a false dichotomy between the righteous and the damned. Born of a victimization that has not mourned, moralism demands that we limit our political imaginations to the task of sermonizing, closing down other modes of critique. All the while neoliberalism licks its chops and smirks at these sermonizers—and for good reason: the goal and critical methodology animating the post-war Left’s disillusioned moralism—to dispel and attack false
consciousness—divides and conquers, legitimates the thoroughly neoliberalized sphere of party politics, and thus distracts us from other logics of coercion.31

Beyond the specific charges of blasphemy rendered against Rushdie, what motivated so much moralistic ire against him is what Timothy Brennan calls Rushdie’s principle of “satiric equal time” (144). By indiscriminately satirizing his characters and the political gestalt they reify, Rushdie thus engages in kynical satire—a form of critique related to Wayne Booth’s concept of “unstable irony” insofar as it refuses to ground itself, refuses to qualify its critical gaze with an “opinion” or final word on the matter. If it were to do so, it would lose its radical character, its capacity to question the ground of the political itself. This is not to say that the satirical criticisms levied in the Verses are unclear or ambivalent. Rather, the text refuses to offer any clear normative program, choosing instead to value the laughter of the nihilist. Lest it perpetuate a broken politics that stays broken because we morally fetishize the self-serving political terms and categories it offers, the Verses dispenses with moralism’s dream of a pure politics. If much of the censure toward Rushdie indicted his cosmopolitan sensibility, then this is no surprise: the cosmopolitan is often hailed as the cynic par excellence, a figure whose suspicion toward the public’s rationality and all forms of legitimacy irritates us because it disturbs the calming yet deadening belief that our politics adequately address power, and that our political feelings prove our moral worth and substitute adequately for other forms of engagement.

If cynicism today emerges less from the so-called loss of grand narratives and more from a breakdown in our ability to sustain discussion and persuasion as the bedrock of healthy political orders—all the more difficult in the age of enlightened false consciousness when persuasion seems foolhardy and the hardening of egos all-the-more attractive—then moralism
and its dour relatives (seriousness, sincerity, earnestness) only hasten that breakdown. Thus

Brown’s driving questions in her *Politics Out of History* are also our own:

> [W]hen the future thus becomes relatively coterminous with the present, so that radical political discontent can no longer make a home in an analysis of a powerfully determining history and a transformed future, where does it then live? What form does this radical discontent take within the emotional substructure of political expressions and political formations? If, as Nietzsche recognized, impotent rage inevitably yields a moralizing (re)action, how might we succeed in rereading contemporary political life through this recognition? (21)

To these questions an answer: satire.

**Rushdie’s “Lack of Positive Images”**

How to critique a form of ideology that is always-already aware of the critique against it? How to unmask once the process of unveiling is rendered—as it is for Hal—laughably moot, itself part of the game? *The Satanic Verses* accomplishes this by satirizing traditional ideology critique as a way of questioning political moralism. In traditional critiques of ideology, once analysts expose the ideological investment behind false universalisms, they unmask social reality for what it “really is,” converting the falsely conscious subject in the process. But once confronted with cynical reason, the traditional critique of ideology no longer appears to work. Cynical reason “takes into account the particular interest behind … ideological universality, the distance between the ideological mask and the reality, but … still finds reason to maintain the mask,” which is to say that cynical reason no longer feels the need to disguise or rationalize its instrumental, manipulative nature—either to itself or others (Zizek 25). By operating in the open, cynical reason feeds the feelings of powerlessness it needs to function.
Instructive in this regard is the smash-hit TV program *The Aliens Show* that Hal Valence owns and Chamcha and his Jewish co-star, Mimi Mamoulian, headline. Acclaimed for its use of computer technology, the show is a “situation comedy about a group of extraterrestrials ranging from cute to psycho, from animal to vegetable, and also mineral” (62). The show riffs off the concept of aliens as foreigners by featuring a belching cactus called “Matilda, the Australien,” a “team of Venusian hip-hoppers and subway spray painters and soul brothers who called themselves the Alien Nation,” and the character “Brains[,] the super intelligent giant abalone who liked eating Chinese” (62). As the show grows in popularity, it attracts political criticism from conservatives for being “too frightening, too sexually explicit” and “too weird,” and then censure from “radical commentators” for its “stereotyping, its reinforcement of the idea of aliens-as-freaks, *its lack of positive images*” (63; my emphasis).

Notice, first, that the novel puts these two political positions on the same political spectrum. Insofar as leftist commentators adhere to the logic of role models and positive images—that political progress means democratizing visibility—they reinforce their opponents’ moralisms by missing the show’s subversiveness. As a postmodern allegory of what Srinivas Aravamudan calls the show’s expression of the “modern anxieties about race, gender, and technology,” the show and its inclusion of UK Raggastani culture among its other hybridizing elements suggests less its overt demonization of UK immigrants and more its playfully postmodern de-reification of identity (9). Put another way, there is a good—and potentially politically useful—reason why the show’s conservative commentators find it “too weird.” But this usefulness (which resides in the realm of rhetoric and strategy) lies outside the pale of moralism’s Manichean calculus, its inability to see the constitutive relation between form and content.
When the show and its actors later become the targets of further protest from the “black radicals” led by Dr. Uruhu Simba, a community leader hailed by the narrator as Hal’s “antithesis,” Hal happily accedes to Simba’s and the protestors’ demands (280). Faced with Hal’s cynicism, the protestors’ victory becomes a pyrrhic one:

It seemed that the protests had succeeded: Valence was ‘de-politicizing’ the show, by firing Chamcha and putting a huge blond Teuton with pectorals and a quaff inside the prosthetic make-up and computer-generated imagery. A latex-and-Quantel Schwarzenegger … The Jews were out, too: instead of Mimi, the show would have a voluptuous shiksa doll. ‘I sent word to Dr. Simba: stick that up your fucking pee aitch dee. No reply has been received. He’ll have to work harder than that if he’s going to take over this little country. I,’ Hal Valence announced, ‘love this fucking country. That’s why I’m going to sell it to the whole goddamn world, Japan, America, fucking Argentina. I’m going to sell the arse off it. That’s what I’ve been selling all my fucking life: the fucking nation. The flag.’ (268)

Hal allows us to see why a politics invested in moralistic censorship alone flounders in the face of a political logic that is more than happy to “de-politicize” and deracialize, to answer a shortsighted, if well-meaning, moralism against stereotypes by simply firing its people of color actors, ridding the show of all political content, and doubling down on dominant WASP stereotypes. The protestors have “no reply” to Val—indeed, in Hal’s blasé estimation they will have to “work harder” to dethrone him and the system he embodies. This is because Hal does not buy into the ideologies of old—civilizational purity included—endemic to the English Right. For him, protecting British capitalism does not mean xenophobically “defending” it from foreign bodies—it means gladly selling it to them in a postidentitarian package, as part and parcel of
their subjectivation under the more universal rationality of the profit motive. Hal’s contempt for Simba’s intellectual pedigree smugly deconstructs (from PhD to “pee aitch dee”) as passé and intellectually myopic the attempt to redress a form of ideology no longer relevant and even perhaps useful to an openly calculating political rationality, one that willingly gives in to ideological demands that only obfuscate that rationality’s workings and field of operation.

Not that the project of addressing damaging representations and stereotypes is an unnecessary or trivial one. Quite the opposite. But *The Aliens Show* illustrates how the moralistic call for “positive images” fails because it depends on a reactionary critique that proceeds too quickly. For Hal has no real stake in the question of positive or negative cultural portrayal. A spokesman for neoliberal technocracy, Hal reiterates to Chamcha how the show’s contents emerge from opinion polling—the data-based form of coercion particular to neoliberalism—not from any ideology *per se*: “‘Audience surveys show … that ethnics don’t watch ethnic shows. They don’t want ‘em … They want fucking *Dynasty*, like everyone else … with you in the show it’s just too damn racial. *The Aliens Show* is too big an idea to be held back by the racial dimension. The merchandising possibilities alone …’” (265). Here Rushdie asks us to consider how racism can persist *sans* an explicitly racist ideology, and how the disposition (form) of critique affects its content: after all, the protest manages only to reify stereotypes of the dominant, erasing the show’s critical dimension and effecting the goal of a resentful slave morality, which is “to distribute one’s suffering in the world, ‘to make others suffer as the sufferer does’” (Brown 26). When Hal runs the show—literally and figuratively—a protest fueled by *ressentiment* cannot but end ironically, enacting the opposite of its pronounced investment in justice and fairness by leaving us where we began: with male “blond Teutons” running the show.32
How does a cynical neoliberalism challenge the new social movements, represented in SV by the protest against *The Aliens Show*? Jon Beasley-Murray’s *Posthegemony* (2010) draws troubling similarities between neoliberal populism and civil society. “[N]eoliberalism,” he says, “is a response to and radicalization of civil society discourse,” meaning that leftist populist politics, traditionally conceived, cannot trump a neoliberalism that is more efficiently populist and immune to ideology critique (26). If cultural studies’ populism “afford[s] it little purchase against a new right, one of whose defining characteristics is often a rejuvenated populism,” then this is because “the right is aware that hegemony is not at issue … the left believes its own rhetoric, the right does not” (26). While we should qualify Beasley-Murray’s tendency to oversimplify and polemicize his diagnosis of our “posthegemonic” times (where social order and coercion are secured by means other than ideology and below the level of conscious discourse) his study helps us see how Left moralism symptomatizes a blinkered attachment to politics-as-hegemony. Brown identifies this attachment as melancholic insofar as the Left has yet to mourn successfully its failed alternative projects and visions, and so clings to the enemy’s playbook.

Left moralism reduces politics to a counter-hegemonic project whose melancholic attachment to naïve concepts of power and resistance render it susceptible to being swallowed by—and ultimately used by—the system it critiques. Beasley’s comments offer a critique of cultural studies’ dream of a political hegemony cured of false consciousness:

Despite its emancipatory and oppositional aura, the concept of civil society becomes part of the tool box of governmentality … Civil society theory plays in the hands of technocratic neoliberalism, providing faint hope with what is at best a naïve vision of democracy as self-limiting radicalism. For neoliberalism seeks to implement a transparent and perfectly functional civil society. Neoliberal
technocrats are scathing about the traditional political processes and institutions … as are advocates of the new social movements. But new social movements add little in the way of transparency or efficiency, so neoliberalism institutes a quasi-direct democracy of opinion polling and media saturation that dissolves the boundary between state and civil society and does away with social movements. (75-6)

Neoliberalism’s dissolution of the boundary requisite to any formulation of a civil society that resists the state occurs at the level of political rationality instead of false consciousness. This mistake is why hegemony theory’s populist concept of power and resistance (one shared by cultural studies and the social movements they seek to theorize and emulate) falters in the face of cynical reason. For Stuart Hall Thatcherism was a form of “authoritarian populism” and “reactionary common sense,” often sieved through a neoconservative moralism. A politics that counters that moralism and populist hegemony with its own therefore assents to a model of politics already shaped by its foe. When critique gets caught up in the game of ideology-as-false-consciousness, we turn a hermeneutics of suspicion into a paranoid game of Clue, assenting to a discourse of us vs. them that we seldom pause to question, and which is part and parcel of cynical reason’s divide-and-conquer ethos. Hence Rushdie’s critique of the “positive image” school of thinking as failing to see how neoliberalism, as Jasbir Puar reminds us in her critique of intersectionality, willingly accommodates difference and reifies identity (“‘I Would Rather Be a Cyborg Than a Goddess’”). Neoliberalism leaves it up to us to polemicize those issues—to render politics a cycle of moralisms and cynicisms that sterilize political critique and with it a central democratic task: persuasion.
The novel, then, asks those who would resist neoliberalism to take seriously its disposition. For neoliberalism is a form of capitalism that might still but no longer needs to naturalize its workings, a system whose superstructure and base do not necessarily correspond in any functionalist way. This is what lies at the root of Hal’s cheekiness, which should not be dismissed offhand as mere caricature of capitalist vulgarity. Hal’s is a fatalistic master cynicism, a form of power that is ironical about its own legitimacy and which fuels the feelings of cynical helplessness it needs to operate. Hence his hilarious warning to Chamcha that “your universe is shrinking,” meaning “the total potential market for a given product or service: the chocolate universe, the slimming universe. The dental universe was everybody with teeth; the others were the denture cosmos” (264). When Hal qualifies this caricature of neoliberal business logic—“‘I’m talking,’ Valence breathed down the phone in his best Deep Throat voice, ‘about the ethnic universe’”—he voices how, rather than any ideological investment per se, what drives contemporary capitalism is a shrewd opportunism toward objectified consumer desire in the form of market fluctuations. These fluctuations, like the pricing mechanism and economic equilibrium as theorized by major neoliberal thinkers, depoliticize the economic and political into otherworldly (“universe,” “cosmos”) yet universalist categories whose workings lie beyond human understanding—and hence human agency.

The allusion to “Deep Throat” here—both to the Watergate informant and to the notorious pornographic film of the same name—satirizes Hal as a figure representing neoliberalism’s fatalism and apathy toward bourgeois tradition and propriety. Hal is “strictly a seat-of-the-pants man, who took for his motto the advice given by Deep Throat to Bob Woodward: Follow the money,” so much so that he decides to have the phrase “set in large sans-serif type and pinned up in his office over a still from All the President’s Men … Follow the
money: it explained, as he was fond of saying, his five wives, all independently wealthy, from each of whom he had received a handsome divorce settlement” (265). In an act of postmodern pastiche—of parody sans its critical edge—Hal dehistoricizes and then adopts a motto originally used to dramatize modern political corruption and celebrate that corruption’s exposure as the victory of a cynical public. But under Thatcher, that phrase floats free of its origins and now legitimizes the profit motive as a usefully apolitical, postideological, and intuitive (“strictly seat-of-the-pants”) edict. Hal memorializes this edict in “sans serif typeface,” known for its plain, overt style that makes it useful for headlines rather body texts; in so doing, he suggests how the typeface’s “no frills” style—which is his own—also characterizes the instrumentalist gestalt in Thatcherite London.

Hal’s proclivity for pornography also refers us to Deep Throat, the infamous pornographic film that catalyzed the commercialization of heterosexual pornography throughout the 1970s to mid-1980s in what was known as the time of “porno-chic.” The popularization of pornography led to indignation from the moralistic Right, giving birth in 1979 to a wave of moralism and the “moral majority” movement. Yet “porno chic” also led to the genre’s legitimation among some of the less traditionally conservative middle and upper classes, marking a new phase in the relationship between bourgeois yuppie culture and capitalism. Porno-chic symptomized the rise of neoliberalism as a more visibly “vulgar”—because anti-bourgeois propriety—political rationality. No wonder Hal’s commercial agency makes a business out of going “in for cheap and cheerful vulgarity, all bums and honky tonk” (279). Recall that for the yuppie entrepreneur, Hal, pornography embodies the neoliberal “whole new world” that Chamcha—still invested in the bourgeois and respectable England of old—cannot fathom. Hal,
then, should be distinguished from the neoconservative Right lest we confuse neoliberalism with neoconservativism, two overlapping yet distinct political rationalities.  

Thus Hal’s vulgarity signifies not only his cynical indifference toward bourgeois moral values, but also neoliberalism’s technocratic relationship to cultural representation, something we see when Chamcha first meets him:

Chamcha hadn’t known what to expect from Valence. At least what he got was unvarnished. ‘You’ve done well,’ Hal congratulated him, ‘for a person of the tinted persuasion … Let me tell you some facts. Within the last three months, we re-shot a peanut-butter poster because it researched better without a black kid in the background. We re-recorded a building society jingle because T’Chairman thought the singer sounded black, even though he was white as a sodding sheet, and even though the year before, we’d used a black boy who, luckily for him, didn’t suffer from an excess of soul. We were told by a major airline that we couldn’t use any blacks in their ads, even though they were actually employees of their airline … You follow me? You follow what I’m telling you?’ It’s a goddamn audition, Saladin realized. ‘I’ve never felt I belonged to a race,’ he replied. Which was perhaps why … Chamcha was on [Hal’s] ‘A list.’ (267)

At first blush the passage seems mere evidence of why Chamcha is later moralistically labeled a “Brown Uncle Tom” by those protesting The Aliens Show, i.e., the color-blind politics to which Chamcha assents. But the passage also suggests neoliberalism’s apathy toward the question of politics qua cultural images. Public perception gathered through advertising “research” propagates racist advertising decisions—the point being that neoliberalism’s technocrats evince
little to no interest in these decisions or to their ideological underpinnings so long as they reflect consumer desire accurately.

Hal’s is a consequentialist, not deontological, capitalism, and that is an important warning for those who would resist a system whose smugness doubles as its modus operandi. This seems especially true when, at the end of the novel, it appears that “Hal Valence’s sanitized Aliens Show had flopped badly in the United States and was being taken off the air. Worse still, his advertising agency … had been swallowed by an American leviathan” (517). Lest we think this proves the success of the protests, the narrator’s reference to the up-until-now invisible goliath of American neoliberalism reminds us that ultimately the show was always-already a red herring of sorts. Even Hal is, in some senses, a decoy: he is not only “on the way out, conquered by the transatlantic dragon he had set out to tame,” but also “unemployed and down to his last few millions, abandoned by his beloved Mrs. Torture and her pals, along with busted entrepreneur- boffins and insider-dealing financiers and renegade ex-ministers” (517). Even Hal—representative of the “yuppie revolution” under Thatcher—eventually succumbs to that revolution’s equal opportunity voracity. There is danger when we individualize critique in the name of moralistic censure, and this is precisely why Chamcha, returning to India to reconnect with his father, face his past demons, and leave bitterness aside, manages “a valedictory lump in the throat even for wicked Hal” (517). This antimoralist gesture—when critique abandons the urge to punish—in many ways doubles as the critical insight that Hal was always little more than a pawn moved by the hands of an economic goliath whose systematicity uses but always exists beyond individuals and their utterances. Why should critique work any differently?

When we police language we may sometimes justly do so in the name of defending defamed subjects and critiquing systemic oppression; but that political strategy also trades global
for individualized critique and overestimates the force of its address to a power that is in some senses ideologically indifferent. Manuel Castells (1983) notes as much when he observes that the UK urban social movements during the 80s sometimes acted as “reactive utopias”: when “people find themselves unable to control the world, they simply shrink the world to the size of their community” (331). Admittedly, there is merit to accusations that Castells’ account (if taken too far) is politically conservative, fatalistic, or even nihilistic (Lowe 1986). But we should also note that Paul Gilroy builds on Castell’s argument for good reason. For Gilroy the rise of the urban social movements in 1980s Britain correlated to the inverse decline of the workers’ movement—what some call the exhaustion of class critique simultaneous to the rise of neoliberalism. Despite how useful those movements were, from the beginning they existed in opposition—and were thus ironically wedded to—the political system that birthed them in the first place, and with whom they had to inevitably bargain, making them more easily absorbable (There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack, 231).

This is not to say that such protests are unjustified or unnecessary, but it is to recognize the rhetorical correlation between two groups that, by reifying a political spectrum defined by dichotomizing moralisms, obfuscate how neoliberalism acts beyond the frames of reference and understanding those political categories offer. The case of The Aliens Show proves so useful because the dynamic the novel describes—how the protests against the show only fortified the stereotypes and system of power such protests meant to combat—also occurred within the context of the Rushdie affair itself, where the novel was exploited by cynical lawmakers and political leaders to levy power and foment public ire.
Rushdie’s Enlightened False Consciousness

Rushdie’s marginalized characters embody neoliberal entrepreneurial values in a way that critiques the moralistic attempt to equate truth with powerlessness (standpoint epistemology), which, as Brown notes, is the goal of most modern political doctrines based in ressentiment (22-3). From Brown’s Nietzschean perspective, such doctrines devitalize subjects and spawn values and institutions that, because their goal is to homogenize thought, action, and subjects in the name of an injured will, “displace and discourage individual and collective aspiration, creativity, distinction, and cultural achievement” (133). Insofar as modern politics above all routinizes and bureaucratizes thought in the service of its elites, those figures depend on this devitalization of social and political life. Thus, when Rushdie satirizes Left moralism he does so to critique political and theoretical assumptions rendered anachronistic in the age of cynical reason—the main one here false consciousness. Hal does so by exemplifying what David Mazella calls “insider cynicism,” which is “the abject cynicism of shamelessness” expressed by those figures of indiscretion who are “the alienated middlemen, the professional shapers of public opinion and redescribers of reality who are given the job of creating and sustaining the illusions that allow the powerful to rule” (10).

Exemplary in this regard is Mimi Mamoulian, Chamcha’s fellow voice-over actor and co-star on The Aliens Show. Chamcha, having survived his miraculous fall from a 747, transmogrification into a goat with devil horns, and a vicious beating by racist police who make him eat his own feces, arrives back in London and finds refuge in a boarding house whose Bengali owners and tenants—and their decision to take him in as “one of their own”—unsettle the Anglophilic Chamcha. Convinced that “his old certainties were slipping away by the moment, along with his old life,” he decides to call Mimi, a figure reminiscent of the bourgeois
Britain he seemed to understand and fit into. When he does, he discovers that she is dating one of Chamcha’s “ethnic co-persons,” a figure by the name of Billy Battuta, who in Chamcha’s mind is

that worthless piece of shit. Playboy Pakistani, turned an unremarkable holiday business … into a fleet of supertankers. A con-man, basically, famous for his romances with leading ladies of the Hindi screen and, according to gossip, for his predilection for white women with enormous breasts and plenty of rump … What did Mimi want with bad Billy …? For boys like Battuta, white women—never mind fat, Jewish, non-deferential white women—were for fucking and throwing over. What one hates in whites—love of brown sugar—one must also hate when it turns up, inverted, in black. Bigotry is not only a function of power. (261)

Here we see not only Chamcha’s distaste for an entrepreneurial con-man (much like Hal) sure to exploit a friend, but also a *ressentiment* and inferiority complex a la Fanon turned inwardly, and then expressed outwardly toward “ethnic co-persons,” suggesting a critique of the Left’s desire for automatic solidarity among the marginalized. Timothy Brennan uses this passage to critique “how strangely detached and insensitive” the novel’s joking and “logic of cosmopolitan ‘universality’ can be,” for “it may be … that ‘bigotry is not only a function of power,’ but it does not seem adequate to argue that in the particular immigration/acculturation complex of contemporary Britain that the central issue is one of ‘human evil’” (165). By this Brennan means that Rushdie’s commitment to satirize the entirety of Britain’s postcolonial race relations—including its black British subjects—exposes the cosmopolitan author’s distance from those he writes about (apparently, Rushdie has been irrevocably “conditioned” by “the cloistered West and its book markets”); by this logic the passage exposes Rushdie’s inability to fathom Paul
Gilroy’s claim that “Black expressive cultures” are not negativist, but rather “affirm while they protest” (165).

Brennan’s Marxist-functionalist moralism reiterates the same role-modeling logic we saw earlier in the case of the protests against the Aliens Show. Brennan’s desire to leave pure and undisturbed the articulation of monolithic political groupings—his self-described allegiance to Gramsci’s call for “a new conformism from below”—finds its apogee in an earlier comment decrying the novel’s “hollow and out of touch” parody of dub poetry (166). For Brennan, this parody placed black British poets “on the same scale as Midnight’s Children’s Cyrus, the guru sham,” and would have garnered (alongside other parodies in the novel) Rushdie more condemnation if the “hostile reception of the novel by Muslims [hadn’t] crowded out the legitimate anger that Britain’s black communities—especially the Caribbean—might have had if given the chance (164-5). Brennan’s critique cuts to the quick of our thesis here: his palpable scorn for Rushdie’s “lack of positive images”—seen as a lack of ideological inconsistency, a failure to toe a party line—epitomizes those who may support the novel’s postmodern treatments of postcoloniality as “a new homelessness that is also a worldliness,” but who cannot stomach the thought of an equal opportunity satire that takes this postmodern quip as something of a clarion call toward opening the space of critique (165).

In his distaste for the novel’s reduction of dub poets to “guru shams”—a strategy he fails to notice that Rushdie takes from Naipaul—Brennan overlooks precisely the how and why behind these satirical treatments. For when SV satirizes marginalized figures by drawing on stereotypes of them, it does so in a surprisingly consistent and self-conscious way, focusing on the sham-like qualities—that molds these figures. Indeed, this is another way of saying (and it shouldn’t have to be said at all) that there is a reason and strategy behind the
novel’s satirical choices, especially the desire to expose the cynical reason endemic to the age
and subjects of Thatcherism, a condition that shared by powerless and powerful alike tells us
something important about the reach, limits, and function of power today. Under what Robin
James calls neoliberalism’s Multi-Racial White Supremacist Patriarchy, “it is more cost-effective
to include some formerly excluded/abjected groups … because this inclusion further reinforces
both the supremacy of the hyperelites and the precarity of the most unruly groups” (“Notes on a
Theory”). Thus neoliberalism’s ideological indifference is also a kind of cynical flexibility
insofar as its willingness to bring some marginalized groups into the fold facilitates its
functioning.

Thus Chamcha’s moralistic ire toward Billy Battuta exposes the moralist’s inability to
recognize a postideological subject. We see this when Mimi, whose name suggests her role as a
mimic woman, responds to Chamcha’s insincere concern for her safety in the complacent idiom
of a spokesperson for neoliberalism, an enlightened false consciousness, in fact:

[C]omprehend, please, that I am an intelligent female. I have read *Finnegans Wake* and am conversant with post-modernist critiques of the West, e.g. that he have here a society capable only of pastiche: a “flattened world” world. When I become the voice of a bottle of bubble bath, *I am entering Flatland knowingly*, understanding what I am doing and why. Viz., I am earning cash. And as an intelligent woman, able to do fifteen minutes on Stoicism and more on Japanese cinema … *I am fully aware of Billy boy’s rep. Don’t teach me about exploitation.* We had exploitation when you-plural were running around in skins. Try being Jewish, female and ugly sometime. You’ll beg to be black. Excuse my French: brown (261; my emphasis).
To this Chamcha responds ineptly: “You concede, then, that he’s exploiting you” (261). But he moralizes to deaf ears, for Mimi parrots a capitalism that rationalizes as progressively feminist the cynical decision to side with and admire swindlers. What incites Mimi’s next tirade is Chamcha attempt to “teach her about exploitation”—a moralizing plea she responds to with disdain: “What’s the fuckin’ diff? … Billy’s a funny boy, a natural scam artist, one of the greats … I’ll tell you some notions I do not require: patriotism, God and love … I like Billy because he knows the score” (262; my emphasis). Mimi embodies a Thatcherite gestalt whose disillusionment toward the grand narratives that once (supposedly) grounded our moral orientation in the world (“some notions I don’t require”) asks us to valorize and ingratiate ourselves with cynical reason. In a world where revolutionary and utopian hopes have been dashed one too many times, cynicisms of all stripes protect from further abuse at the hands of late capitalism—precisely by encouraging participation in or submission to its worldview.

If Mimi represents enlightened false consciousness in the figure of the insider cynic, then Mishal and Anahita Sufyan, teenage daughters of the owners of the hostel that gives Chamcha refuge, represent how cynical reason trickles down into youth and rebel subcultures that often proclaim themselves directed against the racist state while reifying that state. We see this when, after Chamcha tells them an anecdote about Battuta and Mimi scamming a furriers, they react with a Hal-like awe that marks their generational particularity as Thatcher’s children:

I am a man, Chamcha realized, who does not know the score, living in an amoral, survivalist, get-away-with-it world. Mishal and Anahita … were beings who plainly admired such creatures as moonlighters, shoplifters, filchers: scam artists in general. He corrected himself: not admired, that wasn’t it. Neither girl would ever steal a pin. But they saw such persons as representative of the gestalt, of
how-it-was. As an experiment he told them the story of Billy Battuta and the mink coat. Their eyes shone, and at the end they applauded and giggled with delighted.

Wickedness, unpunished, made them laugh. (263)

Chamcha’s moralism here—marked by his opening gesture of righteous self-pity—does not go unnoticed by the glibly self-conscious Mishal, who “read [Chamcha’s] mind and then, laughing at his disapproval,” translates the phrase “‘Scrapheap Youths’ Criminal Idols’” into “yellowpress headlines” while she poses playfully for him (263).

The passage suggests that Thatcher’s youth have learned to cope with the status-quo by means of chic irony. This suggestion puts pressure on the traditional political frameworks that many in the novel unblinkingly trumpet, a fact the novel registers when Chamcha learns not only about the cynicism of the Sufyan sisters, as we saw above, but also that of their mother Hind Sufyan. Depicted as a grasping entrepreneur, Hind reaps the financial benefits of the infamous housing crisis created under Thatcher, one that gentrified inner city spaces and impoverished others in a way that Peter Kalliny recognizes happened in the 1981 London Docklands urban regeneration projects (55). Hind participates in the illegal yet popular act of “lodging five-person families in single rooms, turning blind eyes to health and safety regulations, and claiming ‘temporary accommodation’ allowances from the central government,” which is ironic given that Hind’s race and immigration status matches those of the “maybe thirty temporary human beings, with little hope of being declared permanent” hiding under her roof and from whom she and her daughters “rake[d] in the cash” (264). Chamcha’s reaction to learning about this is a moralistic one—to which Mishal responds, “You needn’t look so fish-faced and holy, anyway … Look where all your law abiding got you” (276). His reaction nonetheless nuances a social
demographic that, as with Brennan, purifies itself in the name of political solidarity and from the position of a knee-jerk, armchair identification with the oppressed.

When Hind’s subaltern tenants (“temporary beings”) die in a fire that destroys the ironically named Shaandar (splendid) Café—“faceless persons stand at windows waving piteously for help, being unable (no mouths) to scream”—the implication is that Hind is in part morally culpable for their deaths, a fact which sits uneasily with critics quick to censure the novel for its negative representation of the black British community. Exemplary here is the rhetorical question Edward Said used to summarize much of the outrage toward Rushdie within the Muslim community shortly after the novel’s publication: “Why must a Moslem, who could be defending and sympathetically interpreting us, represent us so roughly, so expertly and so disrespectfully to an audience already primed to excoriate our traditions, reality, history, religion, language and origin?” (165). The same could be asked of the novel’s satirical depiction of black British characters and protestors, groups who hardly need any more “bad press.” Yet the novel, as we have seen, questions the equation of marginalized identity with moral purity by satirizing the Left’s forms of political essentialism, the cultural reappropriation of a homogenized ancestral past, and righteousness as a rhetoric endemic to the Left. If the novel, as so many have argued, relentlessly critiques fundamentalism in all its forms, it stands to reason that one of those forms is that of moralism’s blanket simplification of politics—which the novel cheekily reproduces in the form of the blanket simplification par excellence: the stereotype.

Moralism is the last stranglehold of a politics uncommitted to hybridity. Thus when the novel both stereotypes black British characters and satirizes them as cynical, it shows how moralism’s impulse to censor actually reproduces what it claims to work against—in this case the stereotype. Moralism demands a righteous purity that is everyday more laughable because
impossible in a world where we are all mongrelized and politically complicit (especially with cynical reason). This, then, is how we might read the novel’s controversial satire of Hind, who as a cardboard cutout Asian immigrant embittered by living in the racist UK, provides a good limit case for understanding what the novel’s humor, hit or miss as it may be, attempts. Traditionalist, overweight, anti-assimilationist, addicted to Indian movie magazines and Bollywood films on VRC, alienated from her husband whom she resents and from her defiantly British children, and a great cook, Hind embodies what James F. English calls “one of the family-pathology features that have been an orientalist staple of the British press since the mid-seventies” (232).

The satirical portrait SV draws here falls flat for many. Bracketing, however, the indignation that arises with “offensive” humor, which so easily prompts ire rather than critical interrogation, the figure of Hind knows that she functions as a character type, inviting a parsing of the novel’s satirical method: “worst of all, there was not one new thing about her complaints, this is how it was for women like her, so now she was no longer just one, just herself, just Hind wife of teacher Sufyan; she had sunk into the anonymity, the characterless plurality, of being merely one-of-the-women-like-her” (250). For English the phrase “characterless plurality” names one of the novel’s satirical principles, for while the “characters may strive for an individuality, an authenticity, a unique and sympathetic identity that could be enfolded into an antistereotypic discourse of ‘positive images’ … this quest is always obstructed by their prior (and often self-conscious) insertion into a system of social relations which has only the most unoriginal, compromised, and politically dubious subject positions to offer” (234).

Almost all satire works within the logic of types—and so does identity politics, despite its earnest aim to restore to its subjects the creative agency to resist those types or create their own. This disturbing resemblance between satire and identity politics is at least one point the novel
pursues in its self-conscious decision to stereotype Hind as a grasping entrepreneur and others as self-serving sham artists. The novel critiques both neoliberal subjectification and moralistic versions of identity politics in the same gesture—by performing their overlap, their mutual reinforcement, in the discourse of types. Showing how neoliberalism subjectifies its victims into cynics through the vectors of meaning that identity politics provides and reifies through moralizing in the first place, the novel questions a political field whose dubious subject positions are also those of a neoliberalism eager to marketize identity in a way David Harvey describes in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. And it does so through humor, by offering levity rather than resentment as a critical path through which to take ownership of a history of types put to oppressive use. As English further notes, the novel’s satire “is *systematic* in the sense of taking the scene and system of social struggle itself, rather than the individuals that comprise that struggle, as the proper object of comic transaction” (234). Thus there is a performative dimension involved here as well, for if satire and comedy are dynamic critiques always attuned to the reader, then they abstain from the moralism implicit in the desire for authenticity. This is because performance brackets the question of authenticity altogether.

And Hind is not the only one of her kind in the novel. Another is Dr. Uhuru Simba, leader of the protests against *The Aliens Show* and someone who is not, in fact, a doctor at all, but rather “plain Sylvester Roberts from down New Cross Way,” a figure who, in Mishal’s words, “wasn’t no African,” had a “tendency to punch uppity women [like herself] in the mouth,” and whose assumed name brings together the word for Lion (Simba) as made famous in the film *Tarzan*, and the word “freedom” in an African language no one can identify specifically, nor do they care to (413). And then there’s Hanif Johnson, a chic lawyer and part-time social activist well off with his private practice and stylish residence and whose affected Trinidadian
drawl was “in perfect control of the languages that mattered: sociological, socialistic, black-radical, anti-anti-anti-racist, demagogic, oratorical, sermonic” (281). At first glance, what appears risible here is how these characters’ reach toward some form of purity to draw attention to themselves renders them self-seeking charlatans, figures whose desire for their political garbs, affected authenticity, and righteousness evince their hypocrisy, a cause for Jumpy’s alienation from these figures and the causes they represent.

Jumpy’s envy toward Hanif also represents the novel’s stance on what a nonmoralistic critique looks like. A novice poet who is attempting to reappropriate the allusions to Virgil’s Aeneid used by Enoch Powell in his infamously racist “Rivers of Blood” speech, Jumpy refers to Hanif’s chic control of language and derision toward the former’s poetry in order to posit his own alternative form of political critique: “But you bastard you rummage in my drawers and laugh at my stupid poems. The real language problem: how to bend it shape it, how to let it be our freedom, how to repossess its poisoned wells, how to master the river of words of time of blood: about all that you haven’t got a clue” (281). Jumpy’s desire to “repossess” language as a vitalistic discourse of “freedom” is all the more difficult when the common-sense response to defamation under Thatcher’s regime is to, like Hanif, sermonize, to turn the “poisoned wells” of language around in the opposite direction rather than “repossess” them.  

Yet the novel warns not only against the dangers of moralism qua marginalized groups that mirror the resentment of their oppressors, but also against moralizing against moralism, against lecturing groups that are attempting to fashion forms and identities of resistance, however intellectually unclear or problematic from a particular perspective they might be. We see this in Chamcha’s reactions at the protest meeting where he dislikes the rhetoric employed because “he didn’t like the use of such American terms as ‘the Man’ in the very different British situation,
where there was no history of slavery; it sounded like an attempt to borrow the glamour of other, more dangerous struggles” (415) This is also something he “felt about the organizers' decision to punctuate the speeches with such meaning—loaded songs as *We Shall Overcome*, and even, for Pete's sake, *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika*. As if all causes were the same, all histories interchangeable (415). Chamcha’s is an intellectual moralism that winces at impure, inaccurate reappropriations of past and ancestral forms of identity put to political use. Thus when Chamcha decides to attend his first political meeting he expects a room filled with “a few angry-looking women” along with “much fist-clenching and righteousness,” but what he finds is actually “far from the kind of evangelical hysteria he’d imagined; it was quiet, worried, wanting to know what could be done” (413).

**Excursus on Cynical Reason, Sincerity, Censorship, Kynicism**

Cynical reason derides its critics openly, reifying the disillusionment it requires to succeed. Exposing ideology is our bread and butter as critics—but what happens when we expose exposure as inept—as a gesture whose futility consists in the opponent’s smugly willing admission of its instrumentalist self-interest? To what kinds of nonmoralistic critique can we turn? This is where kynical satire comes in. Kynicism’s ironic cheerfulness in the face of the extant and impending disaster offers a form of critique that avoids two of the greatest pitfalls facing the practice of criticism today.

The first is the compulsion toward sincerity. Sincerity is unpersuasive and ineffective because it reifies a melancholic (in Freud’s sense) attachment to the idealistic assumption that understanding and exposing the problem is tantamount to solving it, jettisoning the question of rhetorical strategy and with it the importance of critique’s disposition. A type of moralism, sincerity assumes a one-size-fits-all model for rhetoric; itmisses how an effective political
strategy formulates the relation between its form and content in relation to its target. Sincerity scoffs at irony as nothing more than the terrain of the chicly disaffected. But as David Mazella reminds us, “the political idealism that discounts widely shared feelings of cynicism only confirms and reinforces the cynical belief that popular feelings have no effect on the workings of the political system” (qtd in Mazella footnote 16). Sincerity’s resolutely negative and uninspiring approach to resistance fuels the feelings of powerlessness that cynical reason promotes and feeds on, prescribing the good according to what R. Jay Magill calls seriousness’ spirit of “pedantic literalism,” a spirit made manifest in censorship (23).40

The second pitfall facing critique is an attitude of seriousness verging on what Simone de Beauvoir called l’esprit de sérieux, the gravity of those who see their beliefs and ethical systems as objective dogma not to be betrayed rather than contingent, like their own existence. We find this attitude in those who dismiss the critical work done by humor and satire, and who in doing so reify a cynical gestalt that delimits political imagination. The pessimism surrounding the scope, goals, and potential for politics today benefits from a moralistic finger wagging that restricts “real” critique to the mediums of the “serious,” as is evidenced not only in every Fox News story that anxiously smears increasingly popular satire news shows like The Colbert Report, but also in how social justice discourse finds its way into the academy in the form of censorship against controversial ideas, such as Wendy Brown’s worry over how the institutionalization of women’s studies and other identity-based groupings/areas of study might render these groupings essentialist, conservative, and impotent, leading us to forget how contemporary identity-based institutions are “a contingent effect of historically specific social powers” (383).
To these intellectual inquiries Brown’s audience of peers reproached “the questioning and the questioner as politically heinous, hence also intellectually unworthy” (382). Recounting this anecdote as one of her many experiences of political moralism in the academy, Brown then cites Henry Louis Gates’ claim that “speech codes kill critique,” which she alters into her own critique against a moralism as a ironically self-sabotaging enterprise: “speech codes, born of social critique, kill critique” (383). Here Brown cites how identity-based movements despair because betrayed by narratives of progress, unable to manifest social change at higher levels, and at a loss about how to address the systemic authors of their oppression. The result of this despair is a compulsion to configure politics into a matter of remarks and speech in the form of banning and legislating certain forms of address and language at the expense of more substantive, less alienating modes of social critique. This urge to censor and legislate betrays an esprit de sérieux toward the languages and approaches of criticism, one that couldn’t be more opposite the comic’s and satirist’s desire to play with and dereify language, to open political imagination and critique by de-essentializing, naming, overcoming, and ultimately mourning a sense of betrayal and loss that continues to enervate political critique today. The Left’s censorious finger wagging against what counts as proper speech aids neoliberalism’s desire to squelch alternative economic and political futures. Such seriousness restricts us to the terrain of ressentiment and negativism, limiting our capacity to create and fathom other kinds of affirmative or empowering criticism necessary to escape a pessimistic age.

Lest we dismiss irony and sarcasm too quickly as the self-serving and solipsistic tools of so-called ivory-tower cosmopolitans (as Rushdie’s critics so quickly did), we should recall that satire and irony’s opposite—sincerity—is today less persuasive and rousing than ever. For as R. Jay Magill Jr. reminds is, “efforts … to opposite irony … with sincerity or earnestness have not
understood that sincerity as a moral vision can no longer, in a cultural moment that so often
seems a frightening yet absolutely predictable joke, be spoken literally to have any effect” (xi).
Sloterdijk’s claim that modern cynicism is distinguished above all by its enlightened apathy
suggests the need to revive and continue the practice of kynicism, the impudent and sarcastic
spirit of critique that cynically scoffs at reality but without moralism. Kynicism performs what it
critiques in order to refuse the temptations of taking a moral high ground—of offering the
promise of the “right” answers or political positions that would only limit its capacity to
persuade the jaded, for whom moralism represents only another self-serving cliché consistent
with a system whose solemn, if well meaning, detractors only seem to reify that system. Cynical
reason erodes radical political visions and the rousing spirit necessary for those visions to
materialize; the pressing question that Rushdie’s novel seems to ask, then, is where radical
critique in the form of an affirmative cynicism lives today, to which it offers itself in reply.
Cynical reason creates a gestalt of apathy, opportunism, and disenchantment, and then offers as
cures to those conditions the dubious balms of hedonistic consumerism, complacent apathy, and
moralistic finger-snapping. Ousting cynical reason thus lies in a critique that jolts us happily out
of our detached stupor, one that the moralistic urge to censor solidifies.

Today the urge to censor appears in the widespread calls to include trigger warnings on
college syllabi and book covers. As Jennifer Media writes in a NY Times piece entitled
“Warning: The Literary Canon Could Make Students Squirm,” these calls for censorship restrict
the prerogative of provocative thought, reinforce a fragility of mind, and symptomize a time
when the increasing comfort of those who have access to higher education makes its way into
curricula. Such calls are also part and parcel of the subjectivation of posthistorical, postpolitical
subjects, though few see it in this nefarious light. Debates in recent years, such as whether to
excise “nigger” from *Huckleberry Finn*, have been dismissed by many on the academic Left in the terms Media provides; yet this luxury is so rarely if ever afforded to works of comedy or satire that employ potentially offensive descriptions, epithets, and rhetorical strategies. The aim behind this new wave of censorship—all the more disturbing because driven by the Left more than anyone—is to avoid “trauma,” a category that, as Jack Halberstam recently argued, is today deployed in a simplistic, dehistoricized, and literalist way, and one that “casts all social difference in terms of hurt feelings and that divides up politically allied subjects into hierarchies of woundedness” (“The Neo-liberal Rhetoric of Harm, Danger, and Bullying”).

Indeed, for Halberstam this recent trend arose alongside neoliberalism, whose “rhetoric of individual pain obscures the violent sources of social inequity” and “goes to work by psychologizing political difference, individualizing structural exclusions and mystifying political change,” leading “some recent activists … to … [equate] social activism with descriptive statements about individual harm and psychic pain,” when what they are engaging in is, more than anything, a form of censorship (“Triggering Me!”). Halberstam opens his piece by referencing the accusation that feminism and radical politics in general lack humor, which should come as no surprise given the rhetoric that accuses jokers, comedians, and satirists of all stripes of inducing trauma despite the context and nuances of their utterances, despite the very real possibility that their form of critique may be better suited to work through issues that seriousness may only reify.

Little wonder, then, that Rushdie’s critics were all too keen to decontextualize his irreverent humor and the reasons his novel gives for it, attacking him as a smug cosmopolitan figure who speaks the orientalist taglines of an imperialist West. In the words of Shabbir Akhtar, Rushdie went “beyond legitimate satire … into forms of parody and caricature wholly motivated
by indignation and hatred” (30). In a similar vein, Ali A Mazrui analogized the novel to telling a well-received joke in a public square about a parent’s genitals, and then getting paid for it (3).

Even Kalliney, who acknowledges that Rushdie’s equal opportunity caricatures are self-consciously deployed and read “like a handbook on racial typologies or stereotypes,” argues that the novel’s “biting humor” undercuts the voices of London’s postcolonial communities, though Kalliney also presumes to speak on their behalf (71-3). Meanwhile for Fazlun Khalid, Rushdie’s novel only proved that he is nothing more than one of those “‘third world’ writers and intellectuals who defecate upon the inner ecology of their own people as the agents of secular bigots” (244). And as James English notes, what so many of the defenses and denunciations of the novel proved more than anything was the existence of rifts in Britain’s heterogeneous postcolonial communities, which is precisely what Rushdie also argues (206-14). His rhetorical question—“[w]here, indeed, is there a single representative of black Muslim Britain who is not, to some considerable degree, ridiculous—either a fool or a freak, a sham or a stereotype?”—reminds us that whatever the denunciation against *The Verses* it is likely to do with a lack of positive images, even if this absence is precisely Rushdie’s polemical point.

This withholding asks us to question what “positive” should mean in the first place in a time whose moral compass only spins in confusion, a time when censorship aids and abets a neoliberalism that deadens our capacity for affirmative critique. A lack of positive images points us in the direction of a holistic, wholesale, and even perhaps utopian critique of the political status quo that wishes for more than party politics, for more than political hegemony. “Do not build on the good old days but on the bad ones”–this Benjaminian insight appears all the more useful for us today, for our present and future are shaped, prepackaged and fed to us by a neoliberalism that offers us the dubious comfort of moralisms keen to tell us what counts as
“proper” critique in a time where the proper is precisely what needs prodding and questioning. Building on the bad new days means, as it did for Brecht in his critique of Lukacs’ affinity for traditional realism, that an aesthetics interested in shifting the status quo “does not involve undoing techniques but developing them,” which is to say that if literature invokes a critical consciousness it certainly does not do so when censored and sterilized (“Against Georg Lukacs”). It means that when we fetishize the utopianism behind realism’s sincere literalism we spurn the work of understanding of satire and comedy as unashamedly ironic and critical (i.e., performative) of their targets.

Making the Unfunny Funny

The novel’s exploration of cynical reason as endemic to Thatcherite Britain also functions at the level of its larger thematics, leitmotifs, and narrative structure, its infamous vision of a mongrelized, postmodern, and cosmopolitan postcolonial modernity. A good place to start in this regard is the novel’s epigraph, which prefaces the infamous opening scene and is taken from Daniel Defoe’s *The History of the Devil*. The section excised in the novel’s abridged version of the quotation appears in brackets below:

Satan being thus confined to a vagabond, wandering, unsettled condition, is without any certain abode; for though he has, in consequence of his angelic nature, a kind of empire in the liquid waste or air, yet this is certainly part of his punishment that he is [continually hovering over this inhabited globe of earth, swelling with the rage of envy at the felicity of his rival, man, and studying all the means possible to injure and ruin him; but extremely limited in his power,
to his unspeakable mortification: this is his present state,]
without any fixed abode, place, or space allowed him to rest
the sole of his foot upon (qtd. in Brians)

The occasion for the epigraph seems clear given the novel’s biblical opening, which describes how Gibreel Farishta, an atheist Bollywood actor who plays Hindu deities, and Chamcha, an Anglophilic Indian expatriate with an identity crisis, careen toward the English Channel after their terrorist-hijacked aircraft leaving India explodes, causing their “angelicdevilish” fall toward England’s snowy shores. The fall, reminiscent of Adam and Eve’s fall from innocence into the jadedness of history, in turn catalyzes their magical realist transmutation into “Gibreelsaladin Farishtachamcha,” describing how even though Gibreel and Chamcha transform into metaphors of their existential ailments—the former into an avatar of the archangel Gabriel who visits the prophet Mohammed in dream-visions, the latter into a goat-devil who embodies the British racist imagination’s demonization of its postcolonial others—both retain aspects of each other within themselves (5). Understandably, then, for critics such as Martine Hennard Dutheil and David Suter, the fall and the Defoe epigraph before it describe migrancy in familiarly postcolonial terms: as a figuratively “fallen” (unmoored from grand narratives) and itinerant condition that, as in the case of Satan, outcasts are forced to endure (59, 63).

But when we take into account the section of the epigraph that Rushdie strategically excised, then Satan’s fallen condition (borrowed from Milton) represents not only a state of cursed itinerancy, but also a Byronic-heroism, a trait that in today’s terminology we know best as either chic or outsider cynicism. Cynics presume to “know” the “real” state of the world and its affairs, and then spread this hubristic skepticism among the more naïve, (This is why cynicism is so feared by the politically earnest, and so denounced by the politically savvy: it is equal-
opportunity, spreading quickly and indiscriminately, a virus in a political body already primed to
doubt.) Recall that in the case of Defoe’s outcast Satan, as it is for his biblical twin, ultimately it
is his hubristic cynicism that occasions his downfall, impotent rage, and powerlessness.

Satan, then, proves an apt figure for describing modern cynicism as a condition and
outcome of postcoloniality. While the condition of being “unsettled,” “wandering,” etc. refers us
to the much used academic parlance for describing this subject’s supposedly tenuous, alienated,
and ambivalent existence in the imperial metropole, the excised portion of the epigraph points us
toward a more specific type of cynicism—ressentiment—that this migrant condition might also
produce. For Nietzsche ressentiment describes the internalized vengefulness that characterizes
the psychology of those who come off badly in the struggle between the dominant and the
weak—and which keeps them in thrall to the conceptual categories and systems useful to the
dominant. In the epigraph above, Satan’s obsessive “rage of envy” toward a mankind he
promises to “injure and ruin” despite being “extremely limited in his power” asks us to see how
Chamcha’s and Farishta’s are journeys into and out of not only “fallenness” in the sense of
Heidegger’s existential “thrownness,” but also ressentiment as a modern condition.

Although both of Rushdie’s protagonists spend the majority of their narratives battling
various forms of resentment and cynicism—Chamcha’s to do with an inferiority complex and
identity crisis born of Anglophilia, Gibreel’s with a crisis of faith that resonates with the crisis of
the postmodern subject thirsting for grand narratives—the latter who, by killing himself at the
story’s end, suggests the self-destructive incompatibility of the desire for a clear-cut, essentialist,
unhybridized understanding of reality in our (wasn’t it always?) postmodern moment. Opposite
Gibreel’s desire to be “continuous—that is, joined to and arising from his past” and “remain, for
all his vicissitudes, at bottom an untranslated man,” stands Chamcha, “a creature of selected dis-
continuities, a *willing* re—invention” (427). In this, one of the novel’s most explicit philosophical assertions, the narrator paints the devil-horned Chamcha, not the angelic Gibreel, as the poster boy for a postcolonial modernity characterized by incompatibilities and impurities, with no room for those who desire to remain “untranslated.”

In so doing the novel warns against the fundamentalism decreed by the moralist’s and cynic’s presumptuous, self-destructive desire for the unalloyed—to which we now add postcolonial *ressentiment*. By constantly flipping the apparently unbending categories of good vs bad, angel vs devil, the novel offers to our postcolonial modernity what Nietzsche called *Umwertung aller Werte*, the transvaluation of all values. This overturns slave morality—compensatory and anti-life—in favor of a master morality (creative and vitalist). And as Roger Y. Clark reminds us, this is no surprise given that one of the greatest influences on the novel is the concept of “Sympathy for the Devil,” taken from the infamous Rolling Stones song whose cynical cosmopolitan narrator (“I’m a man of wealth and taste”), like the novel’s, playfully flips our moral categories in a way that questions those categories altogether (161).

Instructive in this regard is an episode where Farishta’s anger, generated toward both the British and Chamcha, explodes during one of his lunacy spells. Leading up to his decision to “tropicalize” England, to unleash a stream of warm weather against the “England-induced ambiguities” and moral “fogs” that have come to haunt him, Gibreel notes how “the moral fuzziness of the English was meteorologically induced,” and so calls for importing to a treacherously gray and fickle England the homogeneity of his homeland’s ceaselessly warm weather—constitutive of what is for him is its superior moral makeup (354). Gibreel’s decision is one that essentializes moral superiority by engaging in an act of slave morality that approaches power by valuing what is devalued, by relying on the logic and categories of the powerful: “He
would show them—yes!—his power.—These powerless English!—Did they not think their history would return to haunt them?—‘The native is an oppressed person whose permanent dream is to become the persecutor’ (Fanon) … Then away with all fogs. He would make this land anew” (353). The Fanon quote, taken from “On Violence” in The Wretched of the Earth, has obvious resonances with the concept of ressentiment, which Fanon treated extensively throughout his oeuvre. In The Wretched he sees ressentiment as a condition of psychological enslavement to the colonialist that builds to the point of sparking a violence that wipes clean the psychology of the colonized.

For Fanon, ressentiment is imposed by the colonizer—“The settler keeps alive in the native an anger which he deprives of outlet”—but then reappropriated by the colonized into a righteous violence that sparks decolonization (54). Rushdie’s move here—to have Gibreel speak Fanon’s taglines and call for a will to power, but then render him a self-destructive, dogmatic figure—complicates ressentiment’s colonizer-colonized binary. As Gibreel notes after he promises self-righteous revenge, “Native and settler, that old dispute, continuing now upon these soggy streets, with reversed categories.—It occurred to him now that he was forever joined to the adversary, their arms locked around one another's bodies, mouth to mouth, head to tail, as when they fell to earth” (353). Gibreel’s suicide-inducing failure, then, which is also the failure of the cynic and the moralist, is that he fails to recognize that the complex, interweaving, blurred modes of attachment and belonging that characterize our postcolonial modernity render obsolete and self-destructive the desire for authenticity, purity, and other fundamentally anti-life and anti-political concepts. That Gibreel is a figure whose jealousy, like Othello’s, “doth mock the meat it feeds on,” and whose infamous halitosis gave him, ironically, “an air more saturnine than haloed, in spite of his archangelic name,” suggests that his moralistic condemnations against England
throughout the novel are ones that, however justified, express a bitter death wish put to rest only when he shoots himself and becomes “free” (546).

Opposite Gibreel’s moralistic, wholesale condemnation of England and its modes of marginalization we find Chamcha’s problematic love for England’s oft-trumpeted multiculture. The passage here is crucial, so we quote it at length:

> Of the things of the mind, he had most loved the protean, inexhaustible culture of the Englishspeaking peoples; had said, when courting Pamela, that *Othello*, ‘just that one play’, was worth the total output of any other dramatist in any other language … (Pamela, of course, made incessant efforts to betray her class and race, and so, predictably, professed herself horrified, bracketing Othello with Shylock and beating the racist Shakespeare over the head with the brace of them.)

He had been striving, like the Bengali writer, Nirad Chaudhuri, before him—though without any of that impish, colonial intelligence’s urge to be seen as an enfant terrible—to be worthy of the challenge represented by the phrase *Civis Britannicus sum*. Empire was no more, but still he knew ‘all that was good and living within him’ to have been ‘made, shaped and quickened’ by his encounter with this islet of sensibility … London, its conglomerate nature mirroring his own … Its hospitality—yes!—in spite of immigration laws, and his own recent experience, he still insisted on the truth of that: an imperfect welcome, true, one capable of bigotry, but a real thing, nonetheless … (398)

The back and forth between Chamcha and Pamela cuts to the heart of the matter insofar as her knee-jerk decision to write *Othello* and its author off as racist—a gesture typical of Pamela, depicted as a farcically righteous leftist—interfaces with Chaudhuri’s own complicated reception
among English and Indian readers regarding his preface to *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (1951). Quoted by Chamcha, the infamous preface outraged those who, already familiar with what Ian Almond calls Chaudhuri’s “outrageously Anti-Indian positions,” read it as the manifesto of an “imperial native tool,” as a Macaulay-Anglophile’s encomium to British imperialism. But according to Chaudhuri and other commenters on the affair, the preface was meant to be ironic, which was why it employed mock-imperial rhetoric. This crossmapping between Pamela—a guilty white English leftist who frequently admonishes Chamcha for his Anglophilia—and those who, however understandably given the post-1945 moment of decolonization, wrote Chaudhuri and his ironic critiques off altogether—asks us to see Chamcha’s attachment to the taglines of a Britain that hypocritically trumpets its “hospitality” in a more charitable and perhaps more redeeming light.

Today we find that openness in Gilroy’s *Postcolonial Melancholia* (2005), his attempt to theorize a healthier and more convivial British multicultural by working through the dehistoricizing pathology of those who mourn Britain’s imperial grandeur, a nostalgia that blocks creative cohabitation and working through the horrific aftermath of colonialism. This, he says, is the first step toward redeeming the now unfashionable concept of multiculturalism. Also unfashionable—but equally necessary if we wish to learn to live with otherness—is what Gilroy calls a planetary cosmopolitanism, a disposition Rushdie throughout his career and especially in the *Verses* attempted to enact and which found pushback—as Chamcha does from Pamela—from a disenchanted Left. Today, says Gilroy, jadedness on all sides results in an “inability to conceptualize multicultural and postcolonial relations as anything other than risk and jeopardy,” resulting in “the easy refusal of cosmopolitan and humanistic desires as a failure of political imagination. That lapse is closely associated with the defeat of the Left” (5).
Working through postcolonial melancholia means dealing not only with the painful history of colonialism and its afterlife, but also embracing a spirit of conviviality trumpeted in nonmoralistic satire and comedy, especially those works that “break laughter’s complicity with postcolonial melancholia and … locate new sources of comedy in a remade relationship with our heterogeneous selves, working through the after effects of empire in a self-consciously multicultural nation” (135). Gilroy’s example of such satire is *The Ali G Show*, for even if the show was so often misread and misquoted as legitimizing racism its complex critique of Britain’s contemporary race and class relations reminds us that we should not participate in the dumbing down of culture by dumbing down our approach to it, by disengaging from the task of close reading.

Gilroy’s, then, is an anti-moralistic call toward subtlety and risk—which, not by coincidence, are the trademarks of any satire worth its salt. Thus when satires like Rushdie’s engage in such critiques, they do so not to wipe the historical slate clean or minimize traumas, but because the reward—jolting us out of a cynical, jaded, anti-political stupor, engaging in the dirty work of alleviating postcolonial resentments on all sides, and offering alternative forms of belonging—is so great. There seems little place in that project for cynicism and its versions in moralism and censorship. The inevitably dirty cultural work that satire and comedy enact eschews easy reductionism, especially the ever popular assumption that, as Freud puts it, “laughing at the same jokes is evidence of far-reaching psychical conformity” (qtd in English 14). Such naïve notions, says English, miss the mark because humor often “makes us laugh not merely with our allies but with our enemies, with those whose … social imaginary … ideological repertoire … [are] radically irreconcilable with our own” (14). Rather than seeing this brief moment of connection with those we might abhor most as evidence of impurity, lack of
conviction, or collaborationism, we might see it as useful for engaging in the painful work of persuading political others, of making our way out of a comfortably moralistic moment.

**Pitting Levity Against Gravity**

Insofar as the novel places itself in the literary tradition of Satan’s banishment and lament, and then adds to that the prospect of redemption in the form of satiric critique, it stages the novel within the paradigm of a Thatcherite Britain dominated by postcolonial melancholia. Emphasizing the recurrent theme of falling (both literally and figuratively), the narrator suggests on the opening page that the text to come is about “pitting levity against gravity” (3). Brennan confirms the centrality of this remark when he argues that the phrase “embeds within a passing comment important clues to [the novel’s] narrative strategy. Staring in the face of human misery, and with serious doubts about the human race, Rushdie insists on the comic” (151). This makes sense given the dystopic London toward which Gibreel and Saladin plummet, described as “the great, rotting, beautiful, snow-white, illuminated city, Mahagonny, Babylon, Alphaville” (4). Here, “Babylon” describes modern-day London as mirroring the cursed city of the Old Testament, while “Alphaville” attributes to London the characteristics of the city described in the Jean Luc-Godard black and white noir film of the same name, which is about a dystopian totalitarian future whose mindlessness and computer-esque leader are destroyed by the humanness of a couple’s love.42

Rushdie’s London, then, is dystopic not just for dramatic effect; the city’s similarity to other capitalist dystopias in the popular imagination designate it a breeding ground for the disempowering cynicism neoliberal capitalism produces and depends upon. The most instructive capitalist dystopia Rushdie references in this regard is “Mahagonny.” According to Paul Brians,
the closest reader of allusions in *The Verses* to date, “Mahagonny” here refers to *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, the political-satirical opera composed by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weil in 1930, which was banned by the Nazis in 1933, the same year Brecht and Weill fled Germany. A brutal satire on consumer capitalism, commodification, and corruption under the Weimar regime, the opera also satirized the genre of opera itself as the irrational aider and abettor of the culture industry. Summarizing Brecht’s notes on “Mahagony,” Joy Haslam Calico notes how Brecht’s goal in that piece, and in his theatrical practice in general, was to show how the “operatic apparatus, or culture industry, serves its own needs by reproducing the society that facilitates its survival and gains the complicity of that society by drugging its citizens [with irrational aesthetic elements put to fascist use]” (35-6). If Brecht’s project of critiquing opera’s irrationality in the time of fascism by openly performing and exaggerating that operatic irrationality appears familiar, then this is no surprise considering the *Satanic Verses*’ stated goal: to pit “levity against gravity,” to perform an affirmative, counter-cynical satirical critique in the face of an all-too-cynical Gestalt pervading the UK. Gibreel’s much-repeated refrain throughout the falling sequence—“I tell you, you must die, I tell you, I tell you”—directly refers to Brecht’s opera, asking us to make the unseemly parallel between Thatcher’s neoliberal London and Brecht’s dystopian Mahagonny. That *Mahagonny* satirized 1920s Weimar for the conditions that eventually fueled the rise of fascism—the main condition in Sloterdijk’s estimation was cynical reason, in fact—asks us to do the same when reading the London of the *Verses*.

By painting the proto-fascist Thatcherite London by way of Brecht’s *Mahagonny*, Rushdie suggests how the historical phenomenon in which fascism emerges from cynical disillusionment is a transhistorical phenomenon. Political and economic desperation incite cynicism; and when we are cynical, fascism offers the panacea of absolutism. We see this when
Chamcha and Farishta fall from a very particular terrorist high-jacked jumbo jet: an “AI-420,” to be exact. Srinivas Aravamudan points out how the number functions as “an inside joke between Rushdie and his readership on the Indian subcontinent”: 420 alludes to the Indian Penal Code promoted by Lord Macaulay in 1833 that punished cheating and dishonest dealings, and which still appears in modern-day Indian law. “420,” then, functions “frequently as the abbreviated explanation for an arrest in Indian newspapers, [and] alludes to those who attempt small scale fraud and confidence tricks; however, in the popular imagination, the scope of ‘420’ extends to the more significant villainy of politicians and businessmen” (7). “420” is Indian shorthand for populist political cynicism and their targets. Little wonder that “420” likewise refers to the 1955 Hindi film musical Shri Charsawbees (also known as Mr. 420 and Shree 420), which is about a poor country boy’s journey to the licentious and debauched city of Mumbai, where he gets seduced by corrupt businessmen toward the lifestyle of a cynical “420,” a confidence man and trickster who views the world with suspicion and survives by his skepticism alone.

Aravamudan insists rightly that this seemingly minute allusion “is more crucial to understanding this book than several other frequently untranslated and untranslatable colloquialisms, allusions, and sprinklings of choice Hindu epithets” (7). “420,” however, also designates the novel’s cynical sensibility. Aravamudan notes that political graffiti that appeared in 1977 in Northern India often proclaimed 4+20=420, casting a net of suspicion over both Sanjay Ghandhi’s 4 point program of forced sterilization (among other horrifying eugenicist programs) and his mother Indira’s 20 point program for national development: the mathematically incorrect graffiti spoke of the public distrust toward Indira’s campaign and her proto-fascist slogan “Indira is India,” contributing to her stunning electoral loss because the public decided that the self-serving “Orwellian regime” the mother and son duo represented did
not add up—“two and two was not four” (Aravamudan 7). Beyond confirming how the numerical shorthand marks the novel’s “profoundly Indian sensibility,” the number “420” proves central in a more methodological way— it functions as the novel’s satirical raison d’être: to celebrate and enact an affirmative cynicism in the form of satire that denounces the present as 420. By declaring itself and its embodiments in the falling figures of Gibreel and Chamcha, the detritus of an exploding 420, the novel promises to expose the self-serving political rationalities and apathies pervading the modern and pre-modern world.

The 420 clue offers us a different approach to the novel’s disastrously misunderstood satire on the seventh-century Mecca Rushdie calls “Jahilia” and its leader “Mahound,” proxy for the prophet Muhammad. A city of “shrewd businessmen” whose tribe is name is “Shark,” the seventh-century city is rife with end-of-days cynicism:

The city of Jahilia is built entirely of sand … the whole of it a miracle worked by its citizens, who have learned the trick of transforming the fine white dune-sand of those forsaken parts,—the very stuff of inconstancy,—the quintessence of unsettlement, shifting, treachery, lack-of-form […] I, in my wickedness, sometimes imagine the coming of a great wave, a high wall of foaming water roaring across the desert, a liquid catastrophe full of snapping boats and drowning arms, a tidal wave that would reduce these vain sandcastles to nothing. (94)

The inhabitants of this inconstant (“forsaken,” “shifting,”) city prompt the narrator’s apocalyptic vision of “foaming water roaring across the desert,” linking the fictional city to Yeats’ nightmare of a cynical modernity sundered, disenchanted, and gone awry in the “The Second Coming.” This allusion is no overstatement, for the local population’s reaction to their fallen condition is,
perhaps not surprisingly, the capitalist-consumerist one to “gather, worship, and, above all, spend” (95).

Jahilia’s intermixture of pan-theology and consumerism produces and allows for the rise of “the businessman-turned-prophet, Mahound, [who] is founding one of the world’s great religions” (95). For Ian Almond, Mahound here represents an “entrepreneurial Islam” within the oeuvre of Rushdie’s variegated and constantly shifting representations of Islam. When Mahound introduces monotheism into Jahilia he topples the city’s reigning polytheism, changing how the Jahilians at first thought “that this fellow [Allah] has some sort of overall authority … [but] he isn’t very popular: an all-rounder in an age of specialist [gods]” (99). This toppling requires the “Prophet Messenger Businessman” Mahound to speak the Satanic Verses, referring to his apocryphal declaration that although Allah is chief among the city’s gods, the three main gods among the reigning 365—Lat, Uzza, and Manat—are to be worshiped as well. That this declaration is supposedly divinely inspired, but is actually the result of a calculated treaty between Mahound and the city’s Grandee, who fears the ambitious prophet and so strikes a bargain with him, marks the entrepreneurial founder of Islam as no less cynical than any other politician espousing apparently sincere values while merely engaging in Realpolitik.

Yet the fundamentalist Islam and Mohammad that Rushdie portrays in the Verses is markedly different from those he describes in a 1985 essay, where Almond notes he sketches the prophet as “a classic socialist [who defends] ‘the lower classes of Meccan society’ against the new set of ‘business-based ethics’” sweeping over the area (98-9). While in this essay Mohammad shares the “humanistic desire to protect the older nomadic values … of the lower classes against the competitive demands of a market-driven urban economy,” in the Verses Mohammad represents the self-seeking politician under capitalism (98-9). Somewhere between
1985 and 1989, Rushdie’s thoughts on Islam changed significantly; and given the capitalist paintbrush he uses to depict burgeoning Islam, its founder, and its consumerist followers, it seems that the shift came alongside the intensification and completion of Thatcher’s policies near the end of her tenure.43

Yet this shift—whatever its catalyst—also traces what the novel views as fundamentalist Islam’s declension from morality to moralism, a declension perhaps extant from its very beginnings. As Mahound’s scribe-turned-apostate, Salman the Persian, recounts after the prophet’s rise to power, the hyper-specific rituals and edicts—the moralisms—the prophet began decreeing became suspect because they all-too-conveniently facilitated his command:

Salman the Persian got to wondering what manner of God this was that sounded so much like a businessman … how excessively convenient that [Mahound] should have come up with such a very businesslike archangel, who handed down the management decisions of this highly corporate, if non-corporeal, God. After that Salman began to notice how useful and well-timed the angel’s revelations tended to be … (364).

This passage asks us to look at the particular way in which a fundamentalist Mohammad is “blasphemously” portrayed, to what end he is rendered not only all-too-human, but also a cynical moralizer. Certainly, and as Jussawalla reminds us, from any fundamentalist perspective the representation of the prophet here is by all accounts irrevocably blasphemous; but when the text goes on to satirize the specificity of divinely inspired Koranic dictates as no more than the whims of a self-interested, grasping leader, then there seems a larger import to humanizing Mohammad beyond fulfilling (as is so often said) Rushdie’s cosmopolitan desire to defame his already embattled culture according to an internalized orientalism.
Hence Salman’s (possibly a stand-in for the author himself) cynicism toward the prophet’s self-serving dictates:

[In the years of his and his followers’ exile] Mahound—or should one say the Archangel Gibreel?—should one say Al-Lah?—became obsessed by law. Amid the palm trees of the oasis Gibreel appeared to the Prophet and found himself spouting rules, rules, rules, until the faithful could scarcely bear the prospect of any more revelation, Salman said, rules about every damn thing, if a man farts let him turn his face to the wind, a rule about which hand to use for the purpose of cleaning one’s behind. It was as if no aspect of existence was to be left unregulated, free. The revelation … told the faithful how much to eat, how deeply they should sleep … which sexual positions had received divine sanction … and earmarked the parts of the body which could not be scratched no matter how unbearable they might itch. (363-4)

Mahound’s politicization of everyday acts into regulatory moralisms suggests more than the desperation of a cynical leader to keep the throngs under his control. His attempt to regulate an otherwise “unregulated, free” moral economy, to “earmark” the body and its moralized uses suggests that Rushdie’s critique of Islam is a capitalist—perhaps even a biopolitical—one. As a “prophet-motivated solitary,” in fact, the entrepreneurial Mahound recognizes that keeping the profit margin in the black means requires monopolizing the moral as a financialized market (93). And there is no better way to do this, as Foucault and Nietzsche have repeatedly taught us, than through the self-effacing and disempowering self-discipline reified by a slave morality that equates resentment with resistance, and is thus packaged in a theological moralism toward the debauched, unbelieving, and powerful. Here we see not only fundamentalist Islam’s role in
fomenting and legitimizing the cynical resentment of the disempowered, but also the occasion for Almond’s insight that “Rushdie’s use of the terminology of postwar capitalism to renarrate the story of Islam also serves another purpose—not merely to present religion as a disguised form of capitalism, but also to show capitalism itself as a form of religion” (100). If the text criticizes all forms of puritanical thought and celebrates hybridity, the imagination, and free-thinking according to a Euro-Enlightenment—and also Mughal Islamist—angle on those concepts, then its criticism toward Islam (a very small portion of the 500+ page text) functions in service of a larger systemic critique of the cynicisms and moralisms that continue, cyclically, to disenfranchise the marginalized both then and now.

**The End(s) of Satire**

It is in this sense that we can recognize the occasion for the satire of cynicism and moralism offered by *The Verses*: to expose the debilitating dispositions, often engendered from on high and then embraced as if self-generated, that guide both the religiously and politically disempowered. For as Alan Keenan recognizes, moralism is antipolitical for the same reason it is theologically fundamentalist:

Moralism is deeply antipolitical, not just because it denies both the contestability of its own code and any involvement in power or in the ethically questionable, but also in having abandoned the work of identity transformation necessary to establishing identifications with a larger, more inclusive, political community. Far from working to reverse the vicious circle of public disinvestment, its mode of politicization aims at the victory of one ‘we’ over another, and in this way to help shore up fragile selves through identification with the moral community destined to triumph (41).
During this, the year of the *Verses*’ 25th anniversary, Keenan’s words ring especially true with regard to the moralism slinging that characterized the Rushdie Affair. As testament to moralism’s antipolitical and cynical character—how it detracts from the work of coalition building, psychologizes and individualizes harm in a way that renders it inaccessible to structural analysis, rejects nuanced analysis, and is often deployed to replace social activism—we need only open up the countless tomes dedicated to deconstructing an affair that was very seldom discussed outside a secular West vs religious East paradigm, an affair that often overlooked those voiceless groups manipulated by all-too cynical agendas. Instructive in this regard are Rushdie’s thoughts about the afterlife of the affair: “the row over *The Satanic Verses* was at bottom an argument about who should have the power of the grand narrative, the Story of Islam, and that that power must belong equally to everyone—because those who do not have power over the story that dominates their lives, power to retell it, rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as times change, truly are powerless, because they cannot think new thoughts” (“One Thousand Days in A Balloon”).

While some might balk at Rushdie’s failure to mention his own privilege as a factor in his being able to help shape grand narratives, his string of analogies between the deconstructing, joking, rethinking, and retelling of narrative as a provenance of power gestures toward one of the most cynical truths exposed by the affair: that the “power” to moralize is often offered in compensation for the much greater power of a wry deconstruction that has more ownership over itself and its object of critique than any moralism can. Here, too, lies another irony: the politics of blame that Said worked his entire career to counteract were levied around a piece that critiqued those politics in the first place. Thus Rushdie’s critique of moralism and cynicism finds traction within the field of postcolonialism, perhaps most representatively in Arif Dirlik’s recent
charge that we have moved from “understanding … colonialism as system” toward “a situational approach that valorizes contingency and difference over systemic totality” (433). Brown identifies this shift in thinking on a more global political scale, “as a symptom of a broken historical narrative [i.e., liberation from capitalism and its effects] to which we have not yet forged alternatives” (23).

There is no fixing that narrative. A postcolonial thought that wishes to forge alternatives to older models and understandings of power and resistance requires openness toward other modes and dispositions of critique. As Diana Brydon recently argued, postcolonial thinking at its most fundamental “challenges the failures of the imagination that led to colonialism and its aftermath, a failure that continues with globalization but is now assuming horrific new forms.” Moralism—the destruction of imagination par excellence—thus blocks a fundamental tenet of postcolonial thought: to articulate and explore a politics of imagination, of otherwise. And if moralism, like cynicism, does indeed feed upon its remedies, then maybe we need to concoct something more bitterly wry.
CHAPTER THREE
Hanif Kureishi’s Stylish Nihilism

“And the film was to be an amusement despite its references to racism, unemployment, and Thatcherism. Irony is the modern mode, a way of commenting on bleakness and cruelty without falling into dourness and didacticism”

—Hanif Kureishi

“Talking with many white viewers, I was not shocked to hear that [Kureishi’s] irony never registers, that they saw these scenes as a celebration of sex and desire, as a meeting place across ethnicity. Their responses raise the issue of whether irony alone can be used to promote critical consciousness. It seems to presuppose a politically conscious viewer, one who can see both what is being shown and what is not.”

—bell hooks

In the epigraph above bell hooks exemplifies the identity-political moralism aimed at Hanif Kureishi throughout his career. Here hooks’ moralism emerges from her experience “[a]s a black female” lesbian watching Kureishi’s 1987 Sammy and Rosie Get Laid, which at one point depicts three interracial couples having sex to Rastafarians singing The Temptations’ “My Girl” outside their steaming windows and on the streets of a chaotic Thatcherite England soon after the 1981 Brixton riots (161). The scene uses a song that celebrates heterosexual love to depict a sex scene that excludes a black lesbian couple, producing a critique (that works by exclusion) of Hollywood cinema’s tendency to use lesbian sex to comment on heterosexuality and shore up hetero narrative. For hooks, however, “Kureishi’s irony is not always conveyed” (161). Missing the irony she denounces, hooks argues that the scene fails to “promote critical reflection about the absence of black women” and thus explains for her why viewers “miss the irony and think that the message is that one should focus on personal pleasure to have any satisfaction in life, since the oppression does not end” (159).

Notice here the Marxist-moralist retort against the literature, film, and thought associated with the “New Times,” the postmodern, post-Fordist addendum to the Old Left. Associated as it
was with the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, New Times advocated for the inclusion of cultural critique and the legitimation of the role of pleasure, desire, and other hitherto depoliticized categories in the analysis of social life—not as sources of guilt worthy of shame, but as what Angela McRobbie calls “gestures which created within capitalism and within consumer culture ‘personalized spaces’ which were active rather than passive, negotiated rather than simply received” (127). Extending the claims of cultural postmodernism, New Times opened the space of critique outside the categories of a Left orthodoxy wedded to hegemonic class politics, which sees culture and desire as spheres of capitalist contamination. Hence Ambalavaner Sivanandan’s reactionary piece “All That Melts Into Air is Solid: The Hokum of the New Times,” which claims that New Times recreates Thatcher’s culture of narcissism: “New Times is a fraud, a counterfeit, a humbug. It palms off Thatcherite values as socialist, shores up the Thatcherite market with the pretended politics of choice … makes consumption [and lifestyle] itself the stuff of politics … New Times is Thatcherism in drag” (1).

Despite her association with the New Times turn toward the concepts of intersectionality and hybridity, hooks condemns Kureishi in this Old Left idiom, accusing his work of a “stylish nihilism” that renounces the political. Yet it is precisely such chic disaffection that his films and texts so often satirize. For alongside its critique of heterosexism in the film, the “My Girl” scene exposes the UK’s chic Left as depoliticized, cynical, and self-interested. For when dramatized against the backdrop of a racially and politically torn Thatcherite England, the hip sexual transgressions of England’s liberal middle-class subjects betray the possessive narcissism of those subjects, who throughout the film cynically support then abjure the struggles outside their bedrooms. To be fair, hooks might recognize that the film satirizes precisely this form of posh, cynical subjectivity—how “the cool white people, and even perhaps the cool nonwhites, who
supposedly ‘understand’ what is happening with the oppressed, really don’t care in a way that counts … [and instead] build images of themselves as politically correct”—but she still demands an unironic, sincere didacticism that goes against the film’s ironic mode of critique (158). By demanding a sincerity that sparks a “critical consciousness” in viewers she presumes unwitting, hooks ironically reproduces the dourness and didacticism Kureishi rejects in the epigraph above for good reason: the main object of critique in the often surreal Sammy and Rosie Get Laid is the Left moralism his nondidactic, nonnormative mode of satire avoids, even as it denounces Thatcherism and the British Right. This is the moralistic demand that art deploy a social realism that exchanges complexity for binaries, replaces negative images with positive ones, and speaks the activist taglines of the identity-political Left.  

This exemplary stance against Kureishi invokes the moral didacticism of the old Left and the politics of positive images, an incongruous coupling. How do both forms of moralism work? The former condemns the homology between cultural production (superstructure) and economic production (base), and then claims to have done some progressive work thereby. The politics of positive images asks that marginalized subjects identify with a heroic, vindicating image of their group, one that homogenizes the identity in question and simplifies the relationship of culture to political economy in one-to-one correlative terms.  

As we will see, Kureishi avoids this homological imperative and the politics of positive images, motivating the two representative charges against him, and which his often texts anticipate and satirize in advance: that he is, on the one hand, a capitalist collaborationist and slinger of the hedonistic lifestyle politics Sivanandan and hooks denounce, and on the other, an Uncle Tom who, as Kureishi describes it, gives the British-Asian community reason to think he is “perpetually throwing shit at them” (Anwar 29).
If Kureishi’s ironic satires of multicultural life under Thatcher sunder all forms of orthodoxy—Thatcherite and Leftist alike—then they critique the moralisms above. Instructive in this regard is Stuart Hall’s critical affinity for Kureishi’s 1985 screenplay of *My Beautiful Laundrette*. He calls *Laundrette* one of the “most riveting and important films produced by a black writer in recent years and precisely for the reason that made it controversial: its refusal to represent the black experience in Britain as monolithic, self-contained, sexually stabilized, and always ‘right on’ …always and only ‘positive’” (“New Ethnicities” 274). Here Hall voices his desire to replace the politics of positive images with “a politics of criticism,” which does not put a premium on whether the cultural consumer will “like the fiction or films or the position taken by the people from your own community” (664). A politics of criticism entails a reading practice that does without the “good” marginalized subject—including that subject’s role as PR agent for their group—that grounds the positive image school of thinking. Such a politics embraces the ironies that characterize social life and acknowledges the importance of identity as political category but in way that dereifies that category. Kureishi’s narrative mode—ironic, equal opportunity, nonnormative satire—enacts the politics of criticism and in doing so provides a more strategic understanding of Thatcherism, a more nuanced approach to post-war British multiculture.

How does Kureishi critique yet avoid the moralistic discourses above? The often critically ignored yet consistent object of satire in Kureishi’s *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) is the politics of positive images, which assumes an automatic solidarity among marginalized subjects, and that replacing negative images of those subjects translates into an effective critique of Thatcherism. Positive image critics miss the film’s portrait of a Thatcherism that embraces multiculturalism and in doing so inoculates itself against cultural critique. By embracing the
moralism that equates liberal multiculturalism to effective political critique, positive image critics miss how Thatcherism embraces difference and thus absorbs the Left critique against it. Kureishi’s film satirizes such moralism indirectly and through irony by undercutting its own celebrations of postmodern hybridity and fluidity—precisely those aspects of the film that many embraced and denounced (and who altogether missed how the film consciously undercuts its own self-congratulatory multicultural tenor). In this way, the film satirizes the Left moralism that celebrates besieged identities and concepts of postmodern cultural fluidity such as hybridity as automatically subversive, rather than as useful to Thatcher’s neoliberalism. For Wendy Brown, such Left moralism engages in a “siege mentality” born of political disillusionment, rendering its adherents “susceptible to growing rigidly defensive and brittle out of a sense of their imperiled existence; this defensiveness also tends to preclude their addressing deep sources of injustice and to incite instead a politics that acts at the largely symbolic and gestural level, the level at which moralism runs rampant” (Politics Out of History 39). The film undercuts its own celebration of those subjects Thatcher debased with the implication that such celebration is merely “gestural”—not only because it fails to address neoliberalism’s systemic workings, but also because neoliberalism also celebrates the marginalized so long as they depoliticize themselves and act cynically and post-ideologically—as does neoliberalism itself.

Laundrette accomplishes its form of indirect, self-implicating critique not only by employing irony, but also by decoupling Thatcher’s neoliberalism from her neo-conservatism. These, as Brown reminds us, are overlapping yet distinct political rationalities. By decoupling Thatcher’s amoral, deregulatory neoliberalism from her regulatory, Christian-moralist neo-conservatism, the film produces two ironies that double as political insights: on the one hand, Thatcherism articulated British identity in Manichean, racist, and homophobic terms, but was
multicultural and hybrid in its embrace of “enterprising immigrants.”50 On the other hand, positive image politics plays into a neoliberalism that celebrates positive images and doesn’t necessarily need neo-conservativism to function. As Charles R. Hales argues, the paradox neoliberalism presents to cultural critique “is that a progressive response to [it] has a menacing potential to perpetuate the problem in a new guise” (12). This is because neoliberalism benefits from a myopic focus on wounded identity, which misses the structure of a neoliberalism that works by subjectivizing its targets into post-political cynics—much in the same way Kureishi’s Anglo-Pakistanis in *Laundrette* become precisely the enterprising capitalists Thatcher sought to create. The positive image politics that counter Thatcher’s conservative moralism with a multicultural moralism of their own therefore misses how neoliberalism operates in *and* outside the realm of moralism—of superstructural politics. Indeed, neoliberalism may in fact benefit from a rigid focus on its neoconservative, superstructural element. Attuned to the importance but limitation of identity political critique in the time of Thatcher’s neoliberalism, *Laundrette* finds a middle ground between the Old and New Left. It offers an ironic critique that doubles back on its own celebration of multicultural, hybrid identity, denouncing by performing neoliberalism’s own self-congratulatory multiculturalism as shallow.

Crucial to this critique is its setting: a Thatcherite Britain that resonates with what Paul Gilroy calls the UK’s “post-imperial melancholia,” which is the “anxious, melancholic mood [which] has become part of the infrastructure of [Britain], an immovable, ontological counterpart to the white cliffs of Dover” (*Postcolonial Melancholia* 14). This melancholia comes from the former empire’s inability to mourn and feel a sense of shame regarding its imperial past, creating a colonialist nostalgia for a simpler, more racially and culturally homogenous pre-war Britain—precisely the fantasy Thatcher used to legitimize her brand of populist xenophobia. Britain’s
postcolonial communities will continue to signify loss and failure until Britain learns to grieve and mourn the difficult-to-face horrors of its imperial past. Kureishi’s satires, then, avoid reifying Britain’s “broken narcissism” not only by choosing a lighter and more amusing form of critique that avoids countering one dogmatism with another, but also by avoiding what Gamal Abdel-Shehid calls “the politics of narcissism” at work in the politics of positive images, which by “demand[ing] that positive images need to be heroes and heroines, not just any old folks” counters one narcissism with yet another (126).

Kureishi’s 1985 screenplay positons itself against the post-imperialist nostalgia of British heritage films, which often invoke a sense of sorrow toward Britain’s pre-World War II grand colonial past, a time a place much simpler and socially homogenous (at least in the popular imagination) than post-War Britain. Hence the slew of films adapted from popular literary giants that credentialize Britain’s majesty before its Edenic fall—including Charles Dickens (Little Dorrit), Evelyn Waugh (A Handful of Dust), and E.M. Forster (A Passage to India), to name a few. Other films outside Britain’s literary tradition include Hugh Hudson’s jingoistic Chariots of Fire, and the more recent Shakespeare in Love, which however seemingly innocuous is an exemplary heritage film insofar as it visualizes the harmonious England Thatcherism deployed rhetorically.

Often disparaged by the British Left as “nostalgic screen fictions” and “white flannel films,” heritage films relished the fantasy of pre-World War II British splendor, innocence, consensus, and homogeneity in a way that coincided not only with Enoch Powell’s infamously racist 1968 “Rivers of Blood Speech,” but also Thatcher’s 1978 declaration that 

by the end of the century there [will] be four million people of the new Commonwealth or Pakistan here. Now, that is an awful lot and I think it means
that people are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture and, you know, the British character has done so much for democracy, for law and done so much throughout the world that if there is any fear that it might be swamped people are going to react and be rather hostile to those coming in (qtd. in David Dabydeen 8).

The connection between British heritage film and Thatcherism appeared clear to many insofar as they saw the former as the ideological bulwark to the latter, which premised its slashing of the Welfare state, unions, and equal-rights provisions on a vision of simpler (read: whiter) Britain. If Thatcher used “British character” as a lever point for her neoconservative economic and social agenda, then heritage films did the work of mobilizing such character in the realm of culture. Such nostalgia entails an anger at those to blame for the loss of British character—namely, the Right’s usual suspects: 1960s drug culture, hedonism, unions, immoral lifestyles, loss of the nuclear family, and anti-assimilationist immigrants. Hence the New Right’s decision to demonize these figures just as the Keynesian post-war consensus buckled under recession and double-digit inflation in the latter half of the 1970s. As Claire Monk argues, the Left backlash against the heritage films was quick and pointed: such films were not only “collectively dismissed as escapist nostalgia with no relevance to the problems and identities of contemporary Britain, but they were forcefully attacked as ideologically complicit with—or at least symptomatic of—Thatcherism's radical economic and social restructuring and reinvention of the ‘nation’” (116).

Notice how Monk’s is a rather straightforward, homological approach to the rise and function of heritage films in the 80s and 90s: such films (superstructure) legitimized Thatcher’s neoliberalism (base). No wonder, then, why so many celebrate My Beautiful Laundrette in
precisely these terms—as, that is, a dialectical response to the heritage film that, in opposition to the imperialist nostalgia for homogeneity and British “character,” celebrates a hybrid, multicultural Britain in especially provocative terms (and on the BBC’s Channel 4, no less): by charting an interracial gay couple’s rise to entrepreneurial success in South London, the scene of the Brixton riots and an area of severe underdevelopment under Thatcher. Notice, too, how such a Marxist-correlationist approach also echoes the politics of positive images, which is also the politics of reversal: in place of the bad because flat and flattening image of a simpler, homogenous Britain, Kureishi offers the a racially and sexually transgressive dramatic comedy that sets Britain straight—or rather not straight—with a pluralistic vision of post-war Britain.

Hence the popular and almost hegemonic use of the term “utopian” to characterize the film’s leading gay, interracial couple and the launderette itself as a site of postmodern fluidity, of utopian possibility. John Kirk, for example, describes the launderette in terms of its “ambiguous symbolism … a place where the stains (of the past) can be washed away, and where the lines of racial, sexual, and class antagonism can be ironed out. This is the place in-between, a Utopian gesture of reconciliation and difference” (370). Such celebration, however, misses the film’s self-implicating critique of such celebration, and of how Thatcherism’s neoliberal-deregulatory component (as opposed to its neoconservative-regulatory component) functions through the social categories identity politics provides, framing itself as multicultural, hybrid, and fluid because a universalizing mindset open to “enterprising immigrants” on the condition that they become post-political cynics. Exemplary here is Kirk’s mistaken assumption that the film’s representation of ruthless Anglo-Pakistani entrepreneurs recasts Thatcherism’s individualism according to a wholesome communalism: “In the rhetoric of Thatcherism, entrepreneurialism signified individual success, but seen through the lens of Laundrette, it is
reencoded to articulate not simply personal and business success but a more communal good” (370).

The film ironizes precisely this reading, picturing how Omar (Gordon Warnecke), a second-generation Anglo-Pakistani of mixed parentage who is “on the dole like everyone else in England,” gentrifies a South London laundromat with business partner, squatter, former fascist, and sometimes working-class lover, Johnny (played by a young Daniel Day-Lewis). On the day of the opening, Omar—whose nickname in the film is Omo, providing a point of comedic innuendo throughout the film—has sex with Johnny in a backroom while his benefactor and hyper-Thatcherite Uncle Nasser (referred to, ironically, as a “sadhu of South London”) and his mistress waltz in the main room of the launderette. For many, in the space of the launderette hierarchies of sexuality and identity seem to become a wash, lost in a sea of transgressive possibility. The scene—the film’s most famous and central—is thus heavy-handed, though playful, in its depiction of Omar’s and Johnny’s coupling in a backroom away from his heteronormative uncle (who asks while dancing, “Where are those two buggers anyway?”) and those white working-class patrons outside the laundromat awaiting its grand opening.

Employing space as a form of dramatic irony, the scene undercuts its own self-congratulatory, progressive vision of multicultural pluralism as that of neoliberalism’s. For in the double love scene, there are three spaces, the last of which undercuts the first two: the backroom where Omar and Johnny carouse, which is separated by a one-way mirror from the lobby where Nasser and his mistress waltz, and finally, the street outside, which is filled with working-class patrons waiting to enter the launderette. At one level, the scene comments on the social visibility of heterosexuals vis a vis the invisibility of homosexuality, exploring their uneven yet fluid
relationship to each other via the one way mirror and the symbols of water and fluidity that proliferate the scene, including a fish tank and waves painted on the launderette walls.

But on a second level—that of conscious, ironic exclusion—the double love scene isolates and diminishes the drama of cultural politics inside the utopian space from the figures outside—a space the film never pulls into clear focus but repeatedly associates with the violence and political unrest caused by Thatcher’s gutting of social welfare programs and promotion of unemployment. In this reading, the scene critiques Thatcher’s neoconservative moralism (represented by Nasser’s homophobia) by washing “aberrant” sexuality of its stigma only to double back on itself, satirizing as merely gestural the fluid sexualities of upstarts profiting from the dirty laundry of those left outside the dream of enterprise. This is to say that although the utopian, pluralistic space of the launderette might represent to its inhabitants a space to overcome forms of identity-political marginalization, the film represents this as separate and apart from the dispossession of those outside the launderette, and whose dirty laundry allow for that space’s existence in the first place. In the launderette’s gestural pluralism and fluidity lies a critique of the fluid logic of capital, which manages to accommodate difference—not because it really “believes” in difference and multiculturalism as principles, but because those principles prove useful to its project of expansion and as a way to screen its workings under a Left idiom repurposed to Right ends (indeed, “flexibility” and “fluidity” characterize Thatcherism’s values as well as its economic principles). The film punctures precisely this celebration of fluidity when, at its end, the working class figures outside throw a trashcan through the window of the launderette, highlighting isolated space’s dubious relationship to its constitutive outside.

Such working-class figures haunt the film’s margins, often ironizing (by their constant exclusion) the story’s straightforward content. They also represent the figure against which the
film positions its central, omnipresent metaphors of washing, cleaning, and fluidity—a working class that lacks Omar’s capacity for upward mobility (very un-fluid) and whose dirty laundry creates the local economy Thatcher’s entrepreneurs exploit in order to make their own cleansing rise to the top. As Omar’s uncle says at one point in the film, “What is it that the gora Englishman always needs? Clean clothes.” The comment offers another irony: under a Thatcherism that frames its brutal profit motive as panacea to racism, England’s formerly “unclean,” socially “contaminating” immigrants find upward mobility and achieve a form of superiority over England’s working-class goras—a term for white colonial Brits here applied ironically to the launderette’s white working class (hardly a figure of colonial power).

In Laundrette, Thatcher’s enterprising immigrants succeed by cleaning the post-colonizer’s laundry, suggesting the disturbing possibility that British Asians might become precisely the cynical, post-political subjects Thatcherism strove to foster. Hence Johnny’s ironic observation that Nasser is forcing him to evict Anglo-Pakistani and West Indian squatters: “doesn’t look too good. Pakis doing this sort of thing.” Nasser’s answer: “I’m a professional businessman, not a professional Pakistani. And there’s no question of race in the new enterprise culture” (my emphasis). Here Nasser decouples race from class and in doing so decouples neoconservativism’s racism and xenophobia from neoliberalism’s cynical embrace of the enterprising immigrants it encourages to abandon cultural forms of belonging and solidarity for a monetary reward that promises to trump racism. Here Nasser’s comments also function as a form of self-diagnosis—particularly of the capitalism that renders him a post-identitarian, post-race, post-political subject.

This is a flexible capitalism that reinvigorates the conflict between labor and capital, one Jorge Larrain usefully describes as ironic and paradoxical. As he explains, in Thatcherism,
“Divisions and forms of discrimination are partly blamed on immigration and partly conjured away by patriotism and jingoism. Thatcherite ideology thus tries systematically to displace and conceal the real origin of British problems. It totally transfers or confines the principles of freedom, equality and self-interest to the economic sphere of the market while it attacks them in the political sphere” (68). Kureishi’s brand of irony inhabits and points up the irony of a Thatcherism that by way of sleight of hand, embraces Left cultural categories, marginalizes the very subjects it promises to rescue, and simultaneously creates and conceals “the real origin of British problems.”

Indeed, the scene and the film are riddled with such ironies, many of which work by reference to other poignant moments in the film. When, for example, Johnny in the double love scene lies on top of and thus assumes what seems a symbolic position of superiority over Omar only to dribble champagne into his mouth, the first impression is that Britain’s hierarchies melt in this literally self-congratulatory (champagne) act of reversal in the utopian space of the launderette. But when considered within the larger context of the film, Johnny’s champagne spittle proves merely gestural. For the film never resolves Johnny’s fate as an exploited working-class subject: he works as a bouncer figure in the launderette, helps Nasser evict squatters, and refurbishes the launderette through a form of labor Omar learns to exploit. At one point in the film, Nasser tellingly celebrates this form of exploitation as a landmark of Omar’s socialization into Thatcher’s brutal profit motive, proudly stating that Omar has “hired someone else to do the work—typically English, if I may say that.” Recall, too, that the film refers to champagne only twice: in the double love scene and when Nasser toasts the opening of the laundrette: “We’ll drink to Thatcher and your beautiful laundrette.” “Do they go together?” asks Omar. “Like Dal and Chapatis,” responds Nasser. The exchange works satirically by using a “foreign” cultural
metaphor that describes an apt food pairing to celebrate the very economic system that would
demonize that culture and its expressions, pointing up what a celebratory politics of images
misses: a disturbing point of contact between Thatcherism and the social entity it denigrates but
also shapes into its own image.

If the film uses a form of irony that works by way of reference and self-critique, then
especially crucial to the film are those scenes that bracket the central double love moment.
Before the launderette’s opening, Johnny calls the utopic space the “crown jewel of South
London” (to Omar’s delight). Here the film refers to India’s reputation as the “crown jewel” of
the British Empire, the gift of jewels to Queen Victoria that marked her ascendance to “empress”
of India, and Paul Scott’s The Jewel in the Crown (1966), which details the failure of British
imperialism in India right before WWII, and which Rushdie panned as a post-imperial, apologist
piece of British nostalgia that rehashes colonial-era truisms. The comment recodes a South Asian
embrace of Thatcher’s enterprise culture through a metaphor that describes the British nostalgia
for India’s reputation as the Empire’s greatest piece of property and prestige. In doing so, the
film satirizes how Omar and his family address their marginalization by embracing forms of
exploitation that recall, however distantly, British colonialism’s, but now on a more localized
scale.

In turn, the crown jewel remark recalls Johnny’s hope that the space will be “a laundrette
as big as the ritz,” suggesting Johnny’s desire for an unlikely class ascendance that references
Fitzgerald’s short story “A Diamond as Big as the Ritz,” which critiques the immorality,
hedonism, and self-regard of the wealthy. The comment also refers to Omar’s quick descent into
greed, which the film frames as a compensatory response to his degradation in England. Omar
not only collapses the business’s success into victory over Thatcher’s xenophobic England—“I
want big money. I'm not going to be beat down by this country”—but also takes sadistic pleasure in Johnny’s bottom-of-the-barrel social status: while Johnny scrubs the floor of the launderette, Omar reminds him that a byproduct of his Thatcherite success is an ironic form of class domination and revenge: “When we were in school, you and your friends were kicking me around the place. And what are you doing now? Washing my floor and that's how I like it.”

Here we see an implicit critique of identity politics as unattuned to the complexities of class and neoliberalism. For here and throughout the film draws on the stereotype of the avaricious Asian entrepreneur to critique how Thatcherism subjectivizes England’s postcolonial subjects into cynics, inviting them to abandon forms of solidarity that might extend beyond self-interest for financial reward and the moralistic sadism of the variety Omar expresses. This is a neoliberalism that asks that the marginalized to resist their identity-political suppression by acquiescing to and rising within a system that works at the level of class ascendance and by inculcating a brutal mindset (as in Omar’s claim that “This whole stinking area’s on its knees begging for clean trousers.”) Such a critical move questions the supposedly unified voice and politics of the British-Asian community and the binaries ways in which they, at least for Kureishi, conceptualize their oppression. Pushing against orthodox Left approaches to Thatcherism, this ironic form of critique incites a critical backlash. Hence Perminder Dhillon-Kashyap’s concern that representing Johnny’s victimization by the British-Asian immigrants he used to march against with the National Front is dangerous because it draws on British stereotypes of Asians as sex-crazed and avaricious, creating “a new victim, the white fascist—a victim of economic circumstances who is being exploited by petty bourgeois Asian businessmen” (125).
Yet this “new victim” functions less to legitimize what some might call the film’s playful “reverse racism” and more to critique the limited ability of identity-political positive images to critique Thatcher’s multicultural enterprise culture. At the end of the film, after all, Omar succeeds as Uncle Nasser’s entrepreneurial protégé, becoming a feather in the cap of a Anglo-Pakistani Thatcherite (“you won’t be in the dole queue and Mrs. Thatcher will be happy with me”) who uses economic power to triumph socially and culturally over the racist UK (“we are nothing in England without money”). Here Nasser describes a new kind of cynical, depoliticized subject under Thatcher, one that tells us something important about the contemporary functioning of power in our neoliberal present. If Thatcher’s brand of neoliberalism is indeed a form of subjectivation that is equal-opportunity—“Economics,” as Thatcher said, “is the method; the object is to change the soul”—then Nasser suggests how that form of neoliberal subjectivation trumps those forms of identity politics that miss how the Right appropriates and functions under the language of multiculturalism and anti-racism.

This is similar but ultimately different from the now prevalent stance of Susan Wright, who argues that Thatcher’s New Right “appropriated the new ideas of ‘culture’ from cultural studies, antiracism, and to a lesser extent social anthropology [by mobilizing] ‘culture’ to reinforce exclusion, using it as a euphemism for renewed racism” (11). Here Wright notes how the New Right borrowed from the cultural studies Left to create a cultural racism that did not—nor needed to—premise its racism on essentialist biological difference. This is because the British Right defended “British culture” in a way that had racist social effects but legitimized itself not on biology, but on the basis of its own identity-political woundedness—its besieged identity at the hands of an “intolerant” Left.
Laundrette thus suggests that the New Right does more than naturalize race and racism under the aegis of a beset English culture that survives only as a homogenous entity. Thatcherism also works as a cynical political rationality that offers its victims the promise of upward mobility so long as they depoliticize themselves and embrace a new form of entrepreneurial individualism. In this framework, Nasser’s decision to rescue Omar from a life on the dole—and to a lesser extent, it is implied, from homosexuality—cloaks its self-interest and tribalism as politically progressive. But more than anything, the film uses Nasser’s “charity” to suggest the Thatcherite postcolonial middle- and upper-middle class’s abandonment of collective politics and thinking—not in didactic, recriminatory “race traitor” fashion, but through an irony that is equal opportunity. Herein lies another element that made the film so controversial for some British-Asian critics: hit or miss, it used a critique of middle-class Pakistani immigrant enclaves to dramatize a point about the tendency of some forms of identity politics to fall into self-regarding schisms that fail to extrapolate out into forms of collectivity that would address more systemic issues.

By satirizing the subjects many demanded it defend, Kureishi’s film acts as a counter-example and even critique of the post-imperial nostalgia of British heritage film and other modes of British cultural production, but not in the binary, politics of reversal fashion many would have it. Claire Monk and Amy Sargeant articulate this binary position when they argue that Laundrette acts a critique of heritage film and thinking because it “has a firm location in a contemporary, culturally and sexually diverse and socially divided Britain far away from the corridors of power, the wealth of the City, or the complacent prosperity of the shires” (189).

Culturally and sexually diverse Kureishi’s film may be, but it is certainly not “far away” from the Thatcherism it critiques. Quite the opposite. By depoliticizing the sexual and racial
identities Thatcherism disparaged, the film decouples two overlapping yet different political rationalities: Thatcher’s neoconservative moralism, on the one hand, and her brand of free-market neoliberalism, on the other. “How, asks Wendy Brown, “does a rationality that is expressly amoral at the level of both ends and means (neoliberalism) intersect with one that is expressly moral and regulatory (neoconservatism)? How does a project that empties the world of meaning, that cheapens and deracines life and openly exploits desire, intersect one centered on fixing and enforcing meanings, conserving certain ways of life, and repressing and regulating desire?” (692).

The key term for us here is “desire” insofar as the film’s defenders and celebratory critics often frame Omar and Johnny’s same-sex desire as a liberatory critique of Thatcherism—of, that is, both its neoconservative and neoliberal components. Hence John Clement Ball’s view of the final scene—equal in importance to the double love scene—where Johnny and Omar playfully wash and splash each other in the back of the launderette: “with Omar poised to take over more launderettes, and with Johnny’s crisis of loyalties resolved, the playful splashing of the final scene hints at a new order to come … one that could replace the vengeful satisfaction of Omar as boss and Johnny as boy with a more equitable partnership inspired by the mutuality of erotic love” (17).

But such mutuality is all too tainted by the other meaning suggested by the film’s central metaphor of washing—the cronyism of business partners that “wash each other’s hands” in a launderette ironically renamed from “Churchill’s” to “Powders.” Playing off the shift from an iconic figure of war-time British nostalgia to a post-imperial era of increased drug use and disillusionment under Thatcher (a scene in the film shows Omar and Johnny selling stolen drugs to fund the refurbishment of the launderette), the name refers to the drug money the duo first
steals and then funnels from the hyper-Thatcherite villain and cousin to Omar, Salim, who funds the launderette on the condition that they, in turn, clean his money. “Powders” thus undercuts not only the supposed moral probity of Thatcherism, but also that of its British-Asian entrepreneurial upstarts, whose monetary interests feed parasitically upon the rest of the downtrodden South London community they “clean.”

At one level the film does indeed celebrate Omar and Johnny’s same-sex desire to critique Thatcherism’s perniciously regressive social views, which pathologized homosexuality according to the New Right’s homophobic formulation of British “character.” But the film also proposes that such celebration sans systemic critique leaves Thatcherism’s economic (neoliberal) counterpart untouched. The film suggests precisely this in its ironic contrast of the final washing scene with the scene prior, which depicts a conversation between Omar’s father, Hussein, and Uncle Nasser at a train station outside Omar’s home that is suggestive of both England’s future at a crossroads and Omar’s hybrid, crisscrossing identity. It then cuts to Omar and Johnny splashing and washing each other, stripped to the waist, in the backroom of the launderette with a mirror placed behind them. This concludes the film’s central metaphors of washing and cleaning, which often work as signifiers for class conflict and mobility (Johnny, for example, constantly washes windows, ejects squatters at Nasser’s behest, and refurbishes the launderette; and the film opens by contrasting Johnny’s exile from a squat he himself comes to police with Omar hanging clean laundry nearby). The contrast between the penultimate train scene and the washing scene thus echoes the opening contrast between Omar and Johnny.

In this penultimate scene, then, Nasser asks Hussein—a bedridden, alcoholic, and disillusioned socialist who once had “Bhutto [as] his close friend”—that he “look after me. But I’m finished, eh?” to which Papa responds “only Omar matters.” Nasser’s assurance that he will
“make sure [Omar] is fixed up with a good business future” and even, possibly, heterosexual marriage with his daughter, Tania, is ironic not only because the washing scene belies that promise, but also because Tania leaves on a train at the film’s closing moments and to Nasser’s horror. While the penultimate scene contrasts the failed socialism and defeatism of Hussein with the amoral neoliberalism and spiritedness of Nasser, the final scene seems to wash away both positions as those of a first-generation Omar manages to move beyond. According to this reading, the film ends by replacing the patriarchal authority of both men with empty railroad tracks suggestive of a new path for postcolonial London and by washing away both the failed idealism and melancholy of Omar’s leftist father, and the heterosexist presumptions of his uncle Nasser, offering in their stead a playful and subversive celebration of Omar and Johnny’s rebellious same-sex desire to the soft, kitschy sound of soap bubbles popping as the credits roll.

But what is not washed away is the looming fact of Omar’s “good business future” and Nasser’s influential hand in it. Indeed, the film poses frequently the question of what sort of “future” Kureishi’s decidedly hybridized England portends. Nasser’s promise to guide Omar’s future economic prospects echoes the presentiment of Salim, for whom Omar after his initial success becomes his business partner and also the Anglo-Pakistani community’s “future.” Omar even articulates his own future when he promises to unleash an “armada of launderettes” that will double, as did “Powders,” as sites to wash (launder) Salim’s drug money. Articulated in a Spanish-colonialist idiom, Omar’s plan to expand the business as a colonial-era enterprise recasts in negative, imperialist terms not only the metaphor of cleanliness that charts Omar’s rise in class, but also the film’s final utopian fantasy. For however much it offers a rosy picture of happily multicultural and sexually liberated British future where the restrictions and divisions of
identity become fluid, the scene depends on the same metaphor of washing that renders the launderette the site of Omar’s criminal—but outwardly clean—rise to entrepreneurial success.

The film’s central metaphor of washing renders hybridity—Omar’s and otherwise—contaminated and reappropriated by Thatcherism, and thus a false panacea to Britain’s social ills. The self-critical nature of this metaphor also characterizes how mirrors in the space of the launderette function doubly and self-critically, undercutting the utopian pretensions of cultural postmodernism in the film. Exemplary in this regard is the mirror scene prior the washing episode, which also, we should note, positions a large mirror directly behind the bathing couple, effectively linking the scenes together. Here, Johnny and Omar’s faces merge in a one-way mirror, heralding a hybrid subject that would seem to resolve the film’s social conflicts and foreshadow the film’s final, playful moment of resolution. If, in a utopian idiom, the washing and double love scenes promise to slough off the social differences and conflicts between Omar, Johnny, and the jostling social groups that surround them, then for many these scenes bring to fruition the fluidity and hybridity most provocatively promised by the face-merging scene.

But the three scenes play off each other in ironic, self-undercutting ways critics have yet to stitch together. While the double love and washing scenes exemplify for Daniela Berghahn “the utopian potential of queer desire” (138), the face-merging scene for Eva Rueschmann represents “the most striking visual image of Kureishi’s [and Frears’s] filmic construction of a new British identity, one neither traditionally Pakistani nor exclusively white British but both, altered and transformed by the changes each character has wrought in each other” (xix). The overwhelming critical tendency to celebrate these scenes links them together, at least at one level, as exemplars of the film’s utopian celebration of hybridity as the new order of the day, and
as viable political answer to the Manicheanism of the melancholic British (including that of the white fascist gangsters of the film, and more obviously that of Hussein).

The film undercuts this celebratory tenor in its critically unacknowledged use of mirrors as figures for “homo-narcissism,” which as an originally Freudian concept linked narcissism with homosexuality in heterosexist fashion. As Michael Warner argues, the construction of homosexuality as autoerotic narcissism “allows the constitution of heterosexuality as such” insofar as the heterosexist understanding of gender is premised on difference and dis-identification and not, as in the case of Freud’s narcissistic homosexual, the failure to differentiate between self and other, identification and desire (191). This, however, is one reading of a concept reclaimed by others who charge Warner with oversimplifying Freud. This is all to say that the concept is a contentious one, and its function in Kureishi’s film is complex.

So although, as Masafumi Monden notes, “a link between men, mirrors, and homo-narcissism often relates to a sense of fatality” with regard to Hollywood cinema’s gay, often pathologized protagonists, this is not the function of the mirror in Laundrette, which unselfconsciously represents same-sex desire in a way that does not predicate such desire on a notion of novelty or a constitutive antagonism with heterosexuality (38). Indeed, while some characters in the film wrinkle their noses at the suggestion of Omar and Johnny’s liaison, the duo face no real hurdle when it comes to their same-sex relationship (class and Johnny’s former affiliation with the National Front prove short-lived obstacles). Nor is the function of the mirror to provide a form of cultural redress—a politics of inversion—that would reappropriate as positive the narcissism often derogatorily applied to homosexuality.

Instead, in the film mirrors extend the central metaphor of washing by divesting same-sex desire (washing it clean) of its automatic association with political subversiveness and utopian
potential in a Thatcherite landscape where classism and dispossession works through but also beyond identity defamation. When, after all, Omar and Johnny’s splashing plays off the mirror behind them, the film creates a looping effect that emphasizes the pair’s isolation in the microcosm of a launderette, effectively separating their same-sex desire from larger social concerns outside—from the deliberately excluded central political questions of the film: to what extent do Thatcher’s socially marginalized subjects pursue cultural redress through class domination (as do Omar, Nasser, and Salim)?

If the film thematizes the potential impotence of the cultural studies critique that celebrates marginalized identity as automatically politically progressive and liberatory, then it does so by emphasizing Omar and Johnny’s liberatory interactions as narcissistic—not in the pathological sense Warner would have it, but rather as suggestive of their depoliticization under Thatcher’s enterprising culture. For the narcissism of the self-washing pair is, at least in the film, that of a Thatcherism that famously rewarded narcissism and possessive individualism, and which worked to inculcate precisely this narcissism in their subjects. This suggests that homosexuality, same sex-desire, and multiculturalism in the film are not necessarily “subversive” as many critics see it, but actually rather banal and even, to the probable horror of the cultural studies Left, potentially a vector that neoliberalism appropriates (hence the function of the film’s title, which claims private, not communal, possession over the launderette—“my”).

The film’s constant self-critique also points up the tendency of identity-political discourses of inversion to celebrate besieged identities as “naturally superior” than others when upending discourses that naturalize domination such as biological essentialism. If, as Donald Weber reminds us, part of the work of Kureishi’s oeuvre is to “overturn the smug pieties, the rapacious zeal, and the sad provincialities of cultural insiderism,” then one of these pieties is the
Left’s collapse of marginalized identities into discourses of virtue and respectability—however well-intentioned that collapse might be (126). For such a collapse is potentially self-sabotaging in the context of a neoliberalism that, on the one hand, benefits from unitary focus on supercultural phenomena that might draw attention away from the systemic, and on the other, naturalizes, recodes, and rationalizes its workings through the celebratory discourse of multiculturalism that Thatcher’s neoconservative ideology may have disavowed, but which her economic ideology embraced.

By insisting through irony on what gets left out of the utopic and Thatcherite-narcissistic space of the launderette, the film exemplifies Kureishi’s recent boredom with today’s iterations of multiculturalism as “just food and festivals” and “useless” when compared to the need for what he calls a “class-based politics” to frame a more encompassing notion of multiculture. It also dramatizes his choice to avoid the moralistic demand that he, an “ethnic writer” concerned with sexuality, write “cheering fictions,” the provenance of what he calls

the writer as public relations officer, as hired liar. If there is to be a serious attempt to understand Britain today, with its mix of races and colours, its hysteria and despair, then, writing about it has to be complex. It can’t apologize or idealize. It can’t sentimentalize and it can’t represent only one group as having a monopoly on virtue (“Dirty Washing” 14).

Here Kureishi asks us to recognize the ironic function of Omar’s final lines to Johnny as he disrobes and proceeds to wash him—“You’re dirty. You’re beautiful.” In what amounts to a performative satire of the tagline of the positive-image school of thinking, the lines celebrate and then reappropriate Johnny’s pathologized (“dirty”) sexuality in a way that also encompasses and celebrates the laundrette as a space of purification—of money laundering and upward mobility—
that materializes Nasser’s comment to Omar that “there’s money in muck,” leaving the viewer with a contradiction the film refuses to resolve lest it counteract the complexity of its self-reflexive, equal-opportunity irony.57

Still, the question is a pressing one: why use irony over another genre of writing likely to be taken more “seriously” as a vector for political discourse and as a tool for creating the “critical consciousness” hooks (who is not alone) desires—namely, social realism? The question asks us to unpack the film’s decision to satirize social contradictions under Thatcher without solving those contradictions with a uniform political message—a potentially dangerous task, some might say, in Thatcher’s England, where the demand for “critical consciousness,” the genres presumed to ignite that consciousness, and political answers seem more immediately “useful” and reasons enough to dismiss what to many is the self-indulgence and elitism of irony. Hence Ruvani Ranasingha’s argument, which equates social realism to sincerity and populism, that Kureishi’s irony constitutes his “refusal to commit” to any political vision, marking his difference from those “ethnic artists” that for her avoid such moral failure by offering a “narrative of resistance that ‘subverts or liberates’ without ambiguity or contradiction” (115).

In Laundrette, however, ironic satire depends less on a static and universalizing conception of realism and its presupposed relation to a “narrative of resistance” and more on its context of enunciation—in this case, a melancholic, Thatcherite England. This appears in the Manichean, forlorn idiom of Johnny’s fascist gangster friends, who urge Johnny to stick to his own and renounce his relationship with Omar: “I don't like to see one of our blokes groveling to Pakis. They came over here to work for us. That's why we brought them over. Okay? Don't cut yourself off from your own people. There's no one else who really wants you. Everyone has to belong.” Here we see the broken narcissism of England’s working class under Thatcher, who
redress their dispossession and inferiority complexes through the fantasy scape of a colonial era that offered race superiority and cultural homogeneity as panaceas to social ills. If the film avoids replacing this narcissism with another, then it does so to draw attention to the irony that Britain’s melancholics fall prey to: the desire to blame not the systemic source of their oppression (Thatcher’s neoliberalism), but rather the “foreign” subjects set up as scapegoats by that system’s neoconservative, xenophobic component.58

*Laundrette* thus uses irony to identify and address Thatcherism as itself an ironic political rationality that marginalizes the very subjects it promises to rescue—white working class and postcolonial alike. Under the screen of neoconservative moralism, neoliberalism reaps the benefits of the politics of blame and infighting that many attribute to identity politics’ focus on the superstructural. This focus on the superstructural is not just that of positive image thinking, but also (and ironically) that of Johnny’s white fascist friends, who fail to identify the structural conditions of their oppression. This argument extends Gilroy’s description of Thatcherism as a form of “ambiguity” that works by distorting the traditional political distinctions upon which Left and Right (though the latter increasingly less so) depend: “The politics of ‘race’ in this country is fired by conceptions of national belonging and homogeneity which not only blur the distinction between race and nation, but rely on that very ambiguity” (*Ain’t No Black* 45). But the ambiguity of neoliberalism extends beyond its creation of cultural racism—the provenance of a neoconservatism that sold the fantasy of a uniculture (and the lure of racial resentment therein) only to create a political rationality hybrid and multicultural in its own right. In schizophrenic fashion, Thatcherism disparaged the very hybrid multiculturalism its neoliberal component embraced (albeit a self-serving version of that multiculturalism). For as
Martin Holmes reminds us, Thatcher’s anti-immigrant populism found no problem or contradiction in favoring “increased immigration of entrepreneurial ethnic groups” (9).

Citing statistics regarding the success of South Asian immigrants in the racist US and Britain and the relationship of such success to recent postcolonial writing, Feroza Jussawalla articulates the ironies above in the context of Laundrette: “This is the enigma of the South Asian immigrant in the new world—the enigma of success, of accomplishment, of having made an impact, and also of denigration, of discrimination—the enigma portrayed so well in … My Beautiful Laundrette” (586). So although Kureishi’s defenders often point to the author’s stated reluctance in writing “useful lies and cheering fictions” to explain why his narratives avoid the edict that “ethnic artists” engage in the compensatory politics of positive images, they do not extend the logic of that remark to his representations of hybridity—another, if more hip, form of Left orthodoxy the film also ironizes. Through an ironic self-critique, the film questions its liberal multiculturalism and decouples that multiculturalism’s automatic association with political progress. In this way, the film criticizes identity politics in the same vein as Jacob Ertel, who argues that such politics might “further retrench the state's narrative of progress and liberal multiculturalism at the same time that economic stratification only intensifies under neoliberalism, in which appeals to a rights-based framework focused on representing a diversity of experiences do little to mitigate large-scale social upheaval” (“Identity Inc.”).

The multicultural utopia of Laundrette is also that of neoliberalism. This irony calls for a narrative mode capable of representing that powerful contradiction in a way that avoids playing into the very discourses neoliberalism feeds on. Hence Kureishi’s penchant for what I call his ironic identity politics (the only kind there is), which rethinks multiculturalism outside its now entrenched relationship with neoliberalism. Wedded to a sincerity that mistakenly attributes the
same to its opponent, positive image thinking has the ironic effect of depoliticizing its subjects of address by asking them to misidentify their foe and engage in a didacticism that simplifies how power works, reinforcing belief in a discourse co-opted by the very thing it wants to critique. With this in mind, we might better understand Kureishi’s comment that “[s]atire and irony are probably the ways we can approach the complex problems of our time. At the moment, everything is so horrific that if you wrote straight social realism people wouldn’t be able to bear to watch it” (Kureishi, *The Age*).

*Afterword*

The film is preoccupied with what Alex Beaumont calls “embeddedness as a political preoccupation,” which describes the Left’s melancholic characterization of neoliberalism as an all-encompassing political rationality—one that, like the territorialized launderette—robs the Left of any “pure,” uncontaminated space for critique. As Beaumont notes, a conversation between Kureishi and Frears about their time making the film on an extremely limited budget for the publically funded Channel 4 shows how the pair was particularly aware that Thatcherism was indeed (at least to them) all encompassing, and in a way that threatened the possibility of critique itself. Kureishi notes that while shooting the film, Frears became miffed by the realization of how much Thatcher would approve of us: we’re a thrifty, enterprising, money-making small business. I [Kureishi] say: But part of our purpose is to make popular films which are critical of British society. He says: Thatcher wouldn’t care about that, she’d just praise our initiative for doing something decent despite the odds (140).
Beaumont’s move is to see Frears’ Left melancholia—his belief that Thatcherism contaminates all spheres of social life, including that of criticism—as exemplary of the British’s Left’s failure to stick to its guns and choose self-pity over action when faced by an even more radical form of ideology than radical progressivism in Thatcherism.

But the exchange in fact helps us understand the novel’s recourse to irony—an unstable literary mode that works not by helping the reader tease out a “hidden meaning” that would be the key to interpretation (or, for the more didactically inclined, to political “truth”), but by a contrast that leaves interpretation open and resists any one fixed point of view. *Laundrette*’s is a classic form of satirical irony insofar as it performs, at least on a cursory level, Northrop Frye’s admittedly rigid taxonomy of the satirical and the comic, which sees irony’s practice of “cutting out predication, of simply juxtaposing images without making any assertions about their relationship, [as] consistent with the effort to avoid oratorical rhetoric” (61). Avoiding the moralism that characterizes both the identity-political Left and Thatcher’s neoconservativism, irony in *Laundrette* engages in an immanent critique that exposes but does not answer. By inhabiting the very Thatcherism it critiques, irony in the film offers a nondidactic and nonmoralistic approach to the embeddedness—the omnipresence—of Thatcherism. The film might then be said to promote “critical consciousness”—not the sincere, social realist, positive image variety hooks desires, but rather one that expresses our imbrication with contemporary forces not in order to articulate yet another revolutionary vision, but to take stock of the situation of critique today. For recognizing that imbrication is the first step toward a criticism capable of resisting further encroachment by neoliberal rationality.
CHAPTER FOUR

Neoliberal Narrative in Aravind Adiga’s The White Tiger

What is the place of waste in postcolonial fiction today? Scholars invested in the question offer a range of answers best exemplified by J.D. Esty’s (1999) claim that refuse in the novel of postcolonial disillusionment works to critique “the failures of colonial development, the corruptions of neocolonial politics, [and] the residual quality of postcolonial nationalism” (55). Here Esty refers to the use of scatological imagery by African authors following post-1945 decolonization. Often critiqued for re-creating the very same colonial-era epithets that anticolonial figures wrote against, these authors use scatological satire to express their failed idealism, frustration, and cynicism toward the bleak failures of the anticolonial revolutions.

This chapter explores how the scatological idiom functions in “dark” Anglophone Indian fiction today and asks what that idiom might tell us about neoliberalism as a cynical political rationality. It does so by arguing that Aravind Adiga’s exemplary satire on globalizing India, The White Tiger (2008), ventriloquizes how neoliberalism normalizes misanthropy and self-interest as ethical dispositions today. Indeed, the biggest problem neoliberalism poses to our era lies in its production of what Foucault’s later work (1979) calls “homo oeconomicus,” a form of rational choice individualism that renders subjects “entrepreneurs of themselves” and marks capitalism’s shift from a “supermarket society” to an “enterprise society” (147). This shift toward the regulation of society by the market rather than the other way around gives rise to a form of cynical subjectivity, one that takes market-derived principles as the stuff of normative morality and individual and social governance (98). For Wendy Brown (2006), neoliberalism promotes free market policies that dismantle the welfare state, privatize every service and commodity imaginable, and increase the wealth gap everywhere—but it also “figures citizens as rational economic actors in every sphere of life” (694).
Hence the novel’s unlikely narrator, Balram Halwai, an uneducated Indian villager turned-cutthroat-upstart. Adiga’s novel figures Balram not as a sympathetic spokesperson for the rural poor, but as a monstrous, self-satirizing antihero who allows the deaths of his twenty-three family members in order “to go from being a social entrepreneur to business entrepreneur” in rising Asia (256). Challenging narrative conventions and tones often used by postcolonial authors—namely, social realism, sincerity, authenticity, and sentimentality—the novel suggests through an indigent, sociopathic migrant who murders his way to “self-made” success, that neoliberalism subjectivizes the elite and underclasses alike into dog-eat-dog misanthropists. The novel does so not through the postcolonial allegorical convention whereby the reader identifies with a beset narrator representative of a collective national condition, but by showing how a subaltern-turned-ruthless-upstart deploys scatology—often the provenance of gallows humor and traditional Marxist social critique “from below”—as a reactionary-civilizationist discourse, a discourse that justifies the incursion of free market ideology and rational choice individualism into the subcontinent.

The term “disgust” is useful as it distills the longwinded taxonomy and uses of scatological rhetoric. Disgust is both a shock idiom often used as a form of phenomenological class critique “from below,” and a neoliberal narrative convention. Useful here is the early mode of Georges Bataille, who stresses how disgust functions as a self-privileging, elitist discourse: “The person,” he says, “who protects himself the most anxiously from the various forms of defilement is also the person who enjoys the greatest prestige and who has advantage over others” (67). But Bataille’s disgust is also a rallying cry to collectivize around abject conditions as a starting point for standpoint critique: “We are quick to overlook an immense rubbish heap, the grossness and refuse of our slums, our ‘lower parts’; quick to forget the disgust with being
human, which increased from the contact with a civilization so meticulous that it often seems sick” (66).

_The White Tiger_ is written as a series of letters to the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, whose imminent visit to Bangalore to “meet some Indian entrepreneurs and hear the story of their success from their own lips” impels Balram, the first-person narrator and indigent Indian migrant who self-identifies as a business mogul in the booming subcontinent, to tell his rags-to-riches picaresque (2). Early in the narrative Balram advises Jiabao to ignore the Indian prime minister’s attempt to plug the Ganges as “the river of emancipation,” for he knows the opposite to be the case: “No!—Mr Jiabao, I urge you not to dip in the Ganga, unless you want your mouth full of feces, straw, soggy parts of human bodies, buffalo carrion, and seven different kinds of industrial acids” (12). Here Balram shifts our gaze from spotless superstructure (“river of emancipation”) to sordid base (“feces,” etc), showing how the Ganges’ abject materiality belies its commodification into a sacred and, thus, profitable space. Balram’s tongue-in-cheek description exemplifies the way neoliberals trumpet the Ganges as a wellspring of primordial Indian religious values—“the Mother Ganga, daughter of the Vedas, river of illumination, protector of us all”—only to profit from that space because it tempts the orientalist “American tourists [that] come each year to take photographs of naked sadhus at Hardwar or Benaras” (12).

The prime minister and other elite figures with whom Balram identifies frame the Ganges as idyllic so as to render rural India useful to commercial exploitation; but such figures also emphasize the river’s pollutedness to validate the poverty gap in India today, what Balram describes as: “two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness. The ocean brings light to my country. Every place on the map of India near the ocean is well off. But the river brings darkness to India—the black river” (12). For Balram—an ironic spokesperson for
neoliberalism—global capitalism is “[t]he ocean [that] brings light” to benighted India, meaning that the rural poor self-sabotage and resist economic growth by sanctifying this “river of Death, whose banks are full of rich, dark, sticky mud whose grip traps everything that is planted in it, suffocating and choking and stunting it” (12; my emphasis).

At once a parodist, victim, and beneficiary of neoliberalism’s detrimental reach into rural India, Balram imputes a grotesque atavism to impoverished zones in need of “development” (which are also, he later says, spaces of Naxalite political resistance against the state), rendering neoliberalism’s greatest victims the authors of their own oppression. Such rhetoric credits the toxic waste produced by global capitalism to its on-the-ground victims, echoing Rob Nixon’s (2011) claim that ecological disasters in the third world are routinely attributed to the rural poor’s allegedly aberrant cultural values (2). In the descriptions above, then, Balram employs what I call neoliberal disgust, a form of cynical reason that reworks proletarian obscenity and is part and parcel of the self-serving ethics and rhetoric operative in the subcontinent today.

Throughout the novel, Balram oscillates between two excremental visions, two political cynicisms that structure his sardonic and schizophrenic Bildungsroman. We first see this when, before he has decided to murder his employer in order to steal the funds necessary for his start-up, Balram stumbles into a slum behind an affluent New Delhi shopping district and finds indigent workers defecating in the open. At first, his excremental vision is a distinctly Bataillean, class-collectivist one:

I went … to the line of crappers […] I squatted down with them and grinned. A few immediately turned their eyes away: they were still human beings. Some stared at me blankly as if shame no longer mattered to them. And then I saw one fellow, a thin black fellow, was grinning back at me, as if he were proud of what
he was doing. Still crouching, I moved myself over to where he was squatting and faced him. I smiled as wide as I could. So did he. He began to laugh—and I began to laugh—and then all the crappers laughed together … [And] he began laughing … so violently that he fell down face-first into the ground, still laughing, exposing his stained arse to the stained sky of Delhi. (223)

Here liberating laughter brings together India’s downtrodden, as one defecator moons the “stained sky of Delhi” with a “stained arse.” These figures use their status as untouchable, revolting, socially marginalized subjects to break through the polluted smoke and mirrors masking the systemic source of their abjection (“Delhi”), a source even more profanely “stained” than their defiant arses. Here, as throughout the novel, Balram gleefully interweaves his story of becoming a “self-taught entrepreneur”—which doubles as his murder confession—with scatological gallows humor.

But after laughing in solidarity with his fellow slum dwellers, Balram then recalls how “I washed my face in the common toilet and wiped my hands clean of the slum. I walked into the parking lot, found an iron wrench, aimed a couple of practice blows, and then took it to my room” (223). Here Balram repurposes Bataille’s revolutionary disgust—he switches ethical gears (from the communal to the individual), narrative registers (from collective-national to individualist allegory), and political cynicisms (from working-class to neoliberal) by using a moment of solidarity with the abject poor not as an opportunity to collectivize around wretched social conditions, but rather as disgust-induced fuel to cast-off the sordid masses, self-individualize, and psyche himself up to kill his employer and complete his entrepreneurial rise.

Balram thus embodies what Brown (2003) calls an economic and moral system that “figures individuals as rational, calculating creatures whose moral autonomy is measured by
their capacity for ‘self-care’” (4). That Balram performs this brutally cynical mindset despite his social status suggests not only the novel’s parodic satirical principle, but also how neoliberalism normalizes cynicism as a reasonable, even necessary disposition in a postcolonial era made all the more precarious by our time’s fetish for entrepreneurialism, a discourse and form of subjectivity that works to discredit state-centered approaches to infrastructural failings, among other social welfare issues. As Balram reminds us at the narrative’s opening, his “country is the kind where it pays to play it both ways: the Indian entrepreneur has to be straight and crooked, sly and sincere, at the same time” (6). The rise of such entrepreneurial self-interest and cynicism in the Indian context as Balram frames it suggests how contemporary India under global capitalism rationalizes its abandonment of state welfare mechanisms in favor of trumpeting free market mechanisms as social and economic panaceas.

Balram’s narrative persona, then, cuts two ways in the course of the novel’s parody of an economic discourse where “the operation of a market or market-like structure is seen as an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide for all human action, and substituting for all previously existing ethical beliefs” (Paul Treanor). When Balram joins in collective defecation and other acts of scatological solidarity, he enacts the ironical scatological strategy Peter Sloterdijk (1980) calls “kynicism.” Echoing Bataille’s proletarian crassness, kynicism is a form of immanent, scatological, and parodic critique from below, “the art of declaring oneself, in an ironic, dirty way, to be in agreement with the worst possible things … to be like its mad epoch.” (392). Kynicism’s archetypal figure is Diogenes, the dog philosopher who performed his ascetic philosophy by wallowing in and making a virtue of poverty (105). As literary, rhetorical, and anecdotal figures, kynics expose outrageous social ideologies by parodying them. But Balram also parrots how neoliberalism uses a scatological discourse of its own, reworking the rhetoric of
empire that defamed colonized populations as primitively dirty in order to justify colonialism’s
civilizing (read: sterilizing and purifying) mission. In this way, Balram’s neoliberal disgust
echoes the political rationality Sloterdijk positions against kynicism: “master cynicism,” an elitist
form of socially sanctioned malfeasance that is ironical about its own legitimation, and that
rationalizes ruthless self-interest by presuming the worst about humanity. In our time,
neoliberalism functions not only as a drive to deregulate, privatize, and commodify all spheres of
life, but also as a master cynical logic that advances entrepreneurial avarice through a rhetoric of
revulsion toward underdeveloped spaces and their residents.

Unsurprisingly, Adiga’s narrative innovations have aggravated critics who expect
pilbcolal novels to deploy social-realist conventions, especially sincere, “authentic”
protagonists. For Sanjay Subrahmanyam (2008), both Adiga and the novel suffer from a bad case
of inauthenticity: “What we are dealing with is [an author] with no sense of the texture of Indian
vernaculars, yet claiming to have produced a realistic text” (43). “The merit of the book,” he
continues, “must eventually rest on the credibility and verisimilitude of the voice of Balram
Halwai,” both of which falter for Subrahmanyam because Adiga’s is “a posh English-educated
voice trying to talk dirty, without being able to pull it off” (43). Subrahmanyam’s criticisms of
what he calls the novel’s anthropological inaccuracies, mottled narrative voice, and
“improbable” plot points restricts postcolonial narrative’s “merit” to whether it employs social
realist verisimilitude, is historically bulletproof, and engages in moralistic didacticism:

Some two decades ago, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak wrote a celebrated essay,
‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ At the time, a folklorist is said to have responded:
‘More importantly, can the bourgeois listen?’ We can’t hear Balram Halwai’s
voice here, because the author seems to have no access to it … [I]ts central
character comes across as a cardboard cut-out. The paradox is that for many of this novel’s readers, this lack of verisimilitude will not matter because for them India is and will remain an exotic place. This book adds another brick to the patronising edifice it wants to tear down. (43)

That Subrahmanyanam thinks the novel can and should “access” the authentic voice of the subaltern—a misreading of Spivak—echoes the charges leveled against the novel by Amitava Kumar (2008), for whom White Tiger “comes across as curiously inauthentic” and is yet another novel “from one more outsider, presenting cynical anthropologies to an audience that is not Indian.”

A hardcore realist and a journalist, Kumar dismisses and delegitimizes any form of representation that does not gel with his first-person experience of living among the poor villagers depicted in the novel:

I have witnessed such men, and sometimes women, coming back to their village homes countless times. The novelist seems to know next to nothing about either the love or the despair of the people he writes about. I want to know if others, who might have never visited Bihar, read the passage above and recognize how wrong it is, how the appearance of verisimilitude belies the emotional truths of life in Bihar (Kumar).

Kumar’s journalistic desire for a relatable, “authentic” protagonist that sentimentalizes the downtrodden misses the point of Adiga’s satire because invested (and he admits awareness of this investment) in what Nietzsche called ressentiment, the moralizing and reactionary revenge of the oppressed. This discourse of inversion conflates the position of weakness with that of truth, a conflation, it seems, critics expect to be performed within the novel form.
But Adiga’s novel jettisons sentimentality and sympathetic realism with a laugh, using an unsettling form of parodic, scatological satire and an unorthodox underdog narrative to suggest the ways neoliberalism makes cynical not only the global urban elite, but also (and perhaps more disturbingly) those subjects and subject positions often touted as the last bastions of class collectivity and consciousness. Thus when Balram exposes but also performs and benefits from neoliberalism’s pitiless ethos and modus operandi, what we are left with is an unorthodox critique, on the one hand, of a monstrously amoral system that trumpets self-interest as the highest normative good today, and on the other, of literalist minded critics of fiction who render realism the only politically effective, authentic, and ethical mode of postcolonial representation, and who characterize anything remotely “subaltern” as necessarily positioned against neoliberalism and impervious to its modes of subjectivation.

Balram’s picaresque from “the India of Darkness” (the rural) to “the India of Light” (up-and-coming cities like New Delhi and Bangalore) sets the occasion for the novel’s lampoon of the neoliberal self-flattery swirling around India’s recent economic boom, a self-flattery that constitutes itself over and against a vilified rural. As Betty Joseph (2012) notes, this self-congratulation came in the form of a 2007 advertisement in the national newspaper *The Times of India* titled “India Poised” (70). Now a promotional video with the charismatic celebrity Amitabh Bachchan acting as its stirring spokesperson, the advertisement celebrates India’s 60th year anniversary of national freedom since decolonization:

There are two Indias in this country...

One India is straining at the leash, eager to spring forth and live up to all the adjectives that the world has been showering recently upon us. The other India is the leash.
One India says, give me a chance and I'll prove myself. The other India says, prove yourself and maybe then you'll have a chance.

One India lives in the optimism of our hearts. The other India lurks in the skepticism of your minds.

One India wants. The other India hopes.

One India leads. The other India follows.

But conversions are on the rise … (“India Poised”)

Adding to Joseph’s insight that the novel parodies the anthem by placing its taglines in the mouth of an illiterate migrant who thinks himself part of the elite, we should note that the anthem also voices a form of neoliberal disgust, one cloaked in the rhetoric of optimism. Hence the mantra that economic success depends on choosing buoyancy and self-belief (“give me a chance and I’ll prove myself”) over state-socialist pessimism (“the leash”). The anthem frames India’s economic success as a question of removing the dispositional barriers to free enterprise, the primary one being the gloom located in the countryside as a site of wretched poverty and Naxalite populist dissent toward the state.

The anthem concludes that in “one India, a tiny little voice at the back of the head, is looking down at the bottom of the ravine, and hesitating. The other India is looking up at the sky and saying, ‘It’s time to fly.’” Here the bottom of a ravine—a distant allusion to the polluted Ganges that Adiga picks up on in his novel—becomes the self-serving partition between the bottom-feeding rural poor and starry-eyed urban elite. Seen in the anthem’s terms, Balram represents one of the optimistic and “converted” who are “on the rise,” disgusted with and motivated to supersede bottom feeders. The satirical trick of the novel, then, lies in the scatological musings of neoliberalism’s greatest victim-become-advocate, who critiques that
economic system’s flagrant cynicism and monstrously amoral beneficiaries by parodying its jaundiced platitudes. Today these platitudes circulate in high-profile political campaigns like India Shining and were legitimated by the 2014 ascendance of the far-right nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and their leader, the once-poor and now businessman-turned-prime-minister, Narendra Modi.

So when Balram, who starts his journey engaged in grueling grunge labor, says that “to break the law of his land—to turn bad news into good news—is the entrepreneur’s prerogative,” he parodies a neoliberal narrative convention wherein the once-encumbered-by-pessimists-and-naysayers neoliberal protagonist recounts a cleansing, individualizing escape from fetid collective-social conditions (32). Little wonder, then, that Balram frequently employs childhood flashbacks to describe how rural squalor spurred his entrepreneurial spirit, frequently doubling down on the Ganges as a disgust motif to explain his childhood alienation from provincial, communalist India and to condemn what he calls the retrograde cultural values behind his mother’s abuse before her death. Her funeral, he says, was “so grand that I knew, all at once, that her life must have been miserable. My family was guilty of something” (13). Seeing her burn on a funeral pyre near the polluted Ganges, Balram notes how “mud was holding her back: this big, swelling mound of black ooze. She was trying to fight the black mud; her toes were flexed and resisting; but the mud was sucking her in” (14).

Notice the parody on how entrepreneurial narratives use humble beginnings as clichéd moments of revelation where a “can do!” spirit catalyzes a rags-to-riches journey out of cyclical poverty. This narrative convention mobilizes the seemingly magical effects a difference in outlook can make in order to individualize their protagonists in a heroic mode, as when Balram
next notes how his mother’s funeral near the Ganges inspires an atomizing, life-shaping, and faint-inducing revelation—a moment of Bataillean disgust repurposed by a neoliberal sensibility:

This mud was holding her back: this big, swelling mound of black ooze. She was trying to fight the black mud … but the mud was sucking her in … And then I understood: this was the real god of the Benaras—this black mud of the Ganga into which everything died, and decomposed, and was reborn from, and died into again. The same would happen to me when I died and they brought me here.

Nothing would get liberated here. I stopped breathing. This was the first time in my life I fainted. I haven’t been back to the Ganga since then: I’m leaving that river for the American tourists! (15)

Speaking in the style of the successful mogul reminiscing about his lowly and stifling beginnings among naysayers, Balram credits his disgust epiphany (“nothing would get liberated here”) to the Ganges as the nauseating icon of the poor’s cyclical poverty—here figured as a gross fatalism that riffs on the concept of Hindu reincarnation. Speaking in the mode of individual exceptionalism, he blames India’s infrastructural failings on its not-yet-secularized cultures. He shows how in neoliberal bootstrap narratives, sensitivity and disgust toward waste function as a heuristic for separating the individual-competitive wheat from the collective-fatalistic chaff, for distinguishing those who respond to their base beginnings with either bootstraps resilience or defeatist torpor. Narratives about the developing world such as the India Poised anthem (which Balram ventriloquizes) stereotype the rural as grossly mired in old-world religious pessimism—opposite the neoliberal city’s avant-garde secularism—to explain away the abhorrent kinds of privation afflicting millions in India today. So while in a Bataillean framework the Ganges here could resemble the informe—a shapeless and so malleable form of waste-as-fertilizer that signals
the possibility of the postcolony’s regeneration, especially during a time of political entropy and class repression—Balram’s neoliberal nausea spins that radical possibility toward reactionary, individualist, and self-serving ends (31).

Recall that disgust often functions as a moral idiom that creates the civilized subject’s constitutive other, and often in a way that echoes the history of colonialism’s abjection of the colonized. Warwick Anderson (2010) notes, for example, how “critical histories of imperial hygiene have established that human waste could make strong and supple material for building corporeal distinctions between colonizers and colonized,” distinctions that echoed the thoroughly orientalist-colonialist binaries between “purity and danger, asceticism and promiscuity, retention and pollution, virility and femininity, white and coloured” (169). In a postcolonial framework, then, disgust, functions a hegemonic idiom of the “civilized” elite—what Robert Rawdon Wilson (2002) calls “the moral-legal model of revulsion”:

Human civilization and law rise upon an underlying human capacity to find certain kinds of acts fundamentally disgusting. Disgust is not simply a ‘moral sentiment’ as Freud supposed, but also a proto-legal activity, a necessary condition for the legal system as well as for civilization itself. Disgust teaches you to keep certain things at a distance, to avoid contact and (hence) contamination, and that is, for civilization, an important lesson. (Wilson 50)

What makes neoliberal disgust so insidious, then, is its inversion of Bataille’s investment in scatology as a critical discourse available and useful to the marginalized. For today neoliberalism naturalizes pernicious narratives where the entrepreneur’s cleansing escape from collective indigence is rendered not only admirable, but also universally intelligible because motivated by an equally “universal” emotion and rhetoric—one shared and deployed by grimacing neoliberal
sympathizers worldwide. Crucial in this regard is Joseph’s claim that the novel asks whether “neoliberalism can be universalized as a mindset,” to which we might add that it also functions as an elitist rhetoric based in the oldest and ideologically nefarious revulsions toward the spaces in which the underclasses live, but which are created and reproduced by the elite themselves (80). As the most unlikely neoliberal spokesman, Balram shows how that system creates a jaundiced, dog-eat-dog vernacular and cynicism not only among the elite, but also—and more disturbingly—among the marginalized themselves.

Balram spends the majority of his Bildungsroman parroting and performing how such vernacular fosters and takes advantage of political cynicism on the subcontinent. According to Balram, the days and possibility of anticolonial resistance are over once and for all. This is because Indian civilization never really escaped British colonialism. For Balram, quietism and cynicism always-already run rampant among India’s working masses:

When you [Mr. Jiabao] get here, you’ll be told we Indians invented everything from the Internet to hard-boiled eggs to spaceships before the British stole it all from us. Nonsense. The greatest thing to come out of this country in the ten thousand years of its history is the Rooster Coop. Go to Old Delhi, behind the Jama Masjid, and look at the way they keep chickens there in the market. Hundreds of pale hens and brightly colored roosters, stuffed tightly into wire-mesh cages, packed tightly as worms in a belly, pecking each other and shitting on each other, jostling just for breathing space; the whole cage giving off a horrible stench—the stench of terrified, feathered flesh … The roosters in the coop smell the blood from above. They see the organs of their brothers lying
around them. They know they’re next. Yet they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop.

The very same thing is done with human beings in this country. (147)

Here Balram speaks as a kynic, criticizing the belief in lower-class indolence by describing scatologically the Indian working class’ abject social conditions. But he also—and at the same time—speaks as a master cynic, praising how the highly touted honesty of the Indian underclasses is admirable but also disgusting because evidence of internalized fatalism. Here, then, Balram’s cynical scatological vision simultaneously pinpoints, condemns, and rationalizes the systemic forces behind the working classes’ stifling (“jostling just for breathing space”), socially disintegrating (“pecking each other and shitting on each other”) and stultifying (“Yet they do not rebel”) circumstances in the time of global capitalism.

The passage above sets up the novel’s next joke, which mocks the nationalist discourse that dignifies working-class honesty and hard work—the prime-minister-approved fact that “the trustworthiness of servants is the basis of the entire Indian economy” (149). Here Balram argues a point made by critics of both identity politics and populist nationalism: narratives that romanticize the marginalized may at times do more harm than good because often co-opted by reactionaries to mask other forms of domination—the primary one here being an internalized quietism among the underclasses. Thus the reason, he says, why a chauffeur would return a lost suitcase full of money is not “because Indians are the world’s most honest people, like the prime minister’s booklet will inform you,” but rather “because 99.9 percent of us are caught in the Rooster coop” (148). For Balram, “The Great Indian Rooster Coop” explains why postcolonial India is the epicenter of a unique form of socialization, quietism, and master-slave morality among the masses under global capitalism:
Never before in human history have so few owed so much to so many, Mr. Jiabao. A handful of men in this country have trained the remaining 99.9 percent—as strong, as talented, as intelligent in every way—to exist in perpetual servitude; a servitude so strong that you can put the key of his emancipation in a man’s hands and he will throw it back at you with a curse. (149)

The passage in some ways prefigures the recently mobilized US rhetoric of the 1% vs the 99% but goes beyond it to say that the class oppression taking place in India today depends, above all, on fomenting self-defeatism among those smeared as defeatist in the first place—and who, because as “strong,” “talented,” and “intelligent” as their oppressors, would otherwise rebel.

Hence the novel’s biting critique of the discourse that—as the Indian prime minister’s pamphlet does—cynically lavishes praise on the underclasses: To the questions “Why does the Rooster Coop work?” and “How does it trap so many millions of men and women so effectively?” Balram responds cheekily: “the pride and glory of our nation, the repository of all our love and sacrifice, the subject of no doubt considerable space in the pamphlet that the prime minister will hand over to you, *The Indian family*, is the reason we are trapped and tied to the coop” (150). Here the critique is of a cynical neoliberalism that justifies its existence by appealing to the working and middle-class family values it claims to support and generate but which, as recent work on the deleterious influence of microcredit on rural India notes, it effectively destroys.

Thus when Balram asks “can a man break out of the coop?” he responds with the master cynical logic of neoliberalism as internalized—and performed—by one of its victims: “only a man who is prepared to see his family destroyed—hunted, beaten, and burned alive by the masters—can break out of the coop. That would take no normal human being, but a freak, a
pervert of nature. It would, in fact, take a White Tiger, You are listening to the story of a social entrepreneur, sir” (150). Balram’s claim—his unabashed murder confession, in fact—that breaking out of a deterministic economic system depends on adopting the dehumanizing values of that system exposes the cynicism of a capitalism that wants to have its cultural cake and eat it too. For as Terry Eagleton (2002) reminds us, the bourgeois family values, narratives, and ideologies of stability, honesty, and thriftiness that mask capitalism’s inherent volatility expose a paradox at the heart of that Janus-faced system. Capitalism’s real-world effects—free-market chaos, moral flux, and the uneven distribution of wealth—always contradict its promise of bourgeois moral, economic, and infrastructural stability (128).

Thus one function of Balram’s obscenity in Adiga’s novel is to exaggerate the incursion of neoliberal values into an India whose mores and customs often stem from more communalist traditions. We see this when Balram, recently arrived in New Delhi to work as a chauffeur for his employer, Mr. Ashok, decides to live alone in a communal servants quarters. Asking a resident whether “there [was] someplace a man can be alone here?” Balram provokes astonishment—“Who wants to live alone?”—to which he responds by electing a roach-infested room no one else dares occupy (109). During his first night there, Balram recalls how

The wall was covered with cockroaches, which had come to feed … Some of these cockroaches landed on top of the [mosquito] net; from inside, I could see their dark bodies against its white weave. I folded in the fiber of the net and crushed one of them. The other roaches took no notice of this; they kept on landing on the net—and getting crushed. Maybe everyone who lives in the city gets to be slow and stupid like this, I thought, and smiled, and went to sleep. (110)
Here we find two disgusting visions, two political cynicisms: the first is ky
nical, harkening back
to the Rooster Coop by indulging in swarm imagery to drive home a critique of neoliberalism’s
investment in fostering quietism and a fatalistic worldview among the underclasses. Balram’s
second vision—master cynical—conveys an individualist-competitive ethos that destroys
communal cultural paradigms and fosters either political quietism or opportunism. The passage
rehearses how neoliberalism reaches beyond the market to prescribe citizen-subject conduct
according to a rational actor theory that exchanges old lexicons of morality for new ones that, as
Brown argues, “Relieve the discrepancy between economic and moral behavior by configuring
morality entirely as a matter of rational deliberation about costs, benefits, and consequences” (3).

Thus many scatological and animalizing passages in the novel that poke fun at the
working poor and their forms of sociality also satirize global capitalism for its deleterious effects
on rural, communalist social life. Early on in the novel, for example, Balram describes how

A month before the rains, the men came back from Dhanbad and Delhi and
Calcutta, leaner, darker, angrier, but with money in their pockets. The women
were waiting for them. They hid behind the door, and as soon as the men walked
in, they pounced, like wildcats on a slab of flesh. There was fighting and wailing
and shrieking. My uncles would resist and manage to keep some of their money,
but my father got peeled and skinned every time. ‘I survived the city, but I
couldn’t survive the women in my home,’ he would say, sunk into a corner of the
room. The women would feed him after they fed the buffalo. (22)

Before parsing the passage we should note that the racketeering landowners that control
Balram’s village—who answer to figures at the top of India’s urban-based global economy—are
also described with animal imagery, labeled as the Wild Boar, the Raven, the Buffalo, and the
Stork. In this way, the novel uses animal metaphors to parody how neoliberalism fosters a Darwinian naturalist worldview, which explains away and rationalizes the conflict between the in-fighting rural poor and their more organized, urban predators. The use of animals to characterize rulers and ruled alike under neoliberalism also highlights the eclipsing of rural India under the shadow of the cutthroat ethics, policies, and dispositions operative in the globalizing, urban spaces of Delhi and Bangalore.

For Joseph, the passage shows how “even the poor villager is now in the pores of global capitalism,” using the buffalo as a “parodic allusion to microcredit: a fattened animal remains the hope of all members of the family, yet the entire family seems to be working for it rather than the other way around” (87). The passage therefore gestures toward Gayatri Spivak’s (2008) critique of NGO programs that propose to help poor South Asian communities by giving them microcredit loans. Such loans, the neoliberal story goes, allow workers to buy forms of capital meant to produce the surplus capital necessary to pay back those loans and spur self-made success. The illusion provided by microcredit is the illusion of entrepreneurial optimism as panacea to poverty conceptualized on an individual scale, the neoliberal fantasy that bootstraps individualism still works so long as a generous friend (one that still believes in you!) in the form of a responsible hand out is there to help things along. Such loans suggest how global capitalism is now looking to the rural as a site for shaping subjects and cultures amenable to financialization and creditor/debtor relationships. The novel’s critique of microcredit shows how neoliberalism atomizes subjects and destroys communal social relations and values in a way Maurizio Lazzarato describes as a widespread global phenomenon today.

In the lead-up to brutally murdering and robbing Mr. Ashok, Balram confronts a primary effect of neoliberalism’s material and philosophical incursion into the developing world: a binary
choice between working-class quietism and neoliberal opportunism. Caught between admiration and disgust toward Mr. Ashok, who at first appears an honest capitalist but in the course of the novel becomes more slovenly and corrupt, Balram describes how a disgust object he spots while driving and contemplating murder creates an existential fork in the road—one, the novel suggests, forced on India’s postcolonial underclasses today:

One day at a traffic signal, the driver of the car next to me lowered the window and spat out: he had been chewing *paan*, and a vivid red puddle of expectorate splashed on the hot midday road and festered there like a living thing, spreading and sizzling. A second later, he spat again—and now there was a second puddle on the road. I stared at the two puddles of red, spreading spit—and then:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The left-hand puddle of spit seemed to say</th>
<th>But the right-hand puddle of spit seemed to say</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Your father wanted you to be an honest man.</td>
<td>Your father wanted you to be a <em>man</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Ashok does not hit you or spit on you</td>
<td>Mr. Ashok made you take the blame when his wife killed that child on the road.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Ashok pays you well, 4000 rupees a month.</td>
<td>This is a pittance. You live in a city.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Ashok will ask his father to do the same to your family once you run away.</td>
<td>The very fact that Mr. Ashok threatens your family makes your blood boil!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Here the red puddles of sputum Balram describes as endemic to Indian city life take the form of animistic—indeed, even horoscopic—disgust objects. This “living,” “spreading,” and “sizzling” discharge reveals for the caste-bound Balram his life options in a way that mimics the bleakly binary vision neoliberalism promotes: to either gratefully endure his class condition (the left puddle), or engage in the savage opportunism that will result in the death of his twenty-three family members, but is necessary to get ahead in today’s pitiless world (the right puddle). The class-collectivist, creative, and radical potential Bataille ascribed to disgust objects is here reduced to a capitalist binary that, in our time, has become naturalized in the Manichean idiom of neoliberal disgust (two puddles, two paths).

So when Balram chooses the right puddle he shows how even class resentment—that perennial revolutionary tool put to use by so many political radicals before—might today fall prey to (or worse, become part and parcel of) the neoliberal impulse to jettison collective action and class consciousness in favor of cynical opportunism, all the more commonsensical in the dog-eat-dog world crafted by global capitalism’s widening of the wealth gap. Indeed, this is the conclusion he leaves us with at his story’s end. Sitting in a garishly decorated room that marks his place among India’s secessionist global elite, Balram parrots the familiar discourse of a post-race, post-class, post-revolution society, framing the Indian working class subject as irrevocably severed from class solidarity, as more alone and self-dependent than ever in the atomizing age of global capitalism:

An Indian revolution? No, sir. It won’t happen. People in this country are still waiting for the war of their freedom to come from somewhere else—from the jungles, from the mountains, from China, from Pakistan. That will never happen.
Every man must make his own Benaras. The book of your revolution sits in the pit of your belly, young Indian. Crap it out and read. (261)

The references to Maoist political resistance in the “jungles” and “mountains” of present-day India gesture toward viable positions of political resistance that—as Arundhati Roy reminds us—are still very much alive but often rendered invisible and sabotaged by neoliberal interests. But if we focus on these important yet short-lived references within the novel, we not only disregard the novel’s critique of its corrupt Maoist figure—“The Great Socialist”—but also dampen the thoroughly disgusting dystopia it has carefully crafted for the reader. For in Adiga’s parody of neoliberalism, that economic system’s unlikely poster boy and antihero is Balram: representative of the new managerial-entrepreneurial class in India, a class that deems the anticolonial era of the collective over and done with in order to sell you on the cynical promise that success lies in an optimism forgeable only “in the pit of your belly,” isolating your political existence into a fetid and atomizing script (“crap it out and read”) quite unlike the scene of scatological protest Balram enjoys earlier, however briefly.

As we have seen through Balram’s jaded eyes, neoliberal disgust names the strategic, opportunistic cynicism behind the economic philosophy that David Harvey (2005) describes as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms” (2). By placing the language of free enterprise in the mouth of a pitiless migrant, The White Tiger parodies how neoliberalism lewdly eyes up the developing world through a misanthropic vision of postcolonial society. If, as Connor Ryan (2013) has recently argued, representations of waste in the postcolonial novel have shifted since early postindependence—from unredeemable waste to potentially refurbishable material that remakes the nation anew—then Adiga’s critical move is to suggest that in our time
shit also functions as the reactionary political rhetoric endemic to neoliberalism, its proponents, and even, the novel disturbingly suggests, its victims too (66). We are no longer in the era of postcolonial disillusionment, which critics such as Esty identify with the novelistic turn toward and use of scatology as a mode of resistance, one useful to representing both the postcolonial novelist’s sense of self-loathing and anger at what they framed as the fatalistic masses and failed promises of anticolonial revolution. Rather—and as Adiga’s bleakly satirical novel suggests—today’s era of postcolonial disillusionment finds scatology in the hands of precisely those figures it was meant to criticize in the first place, and who are also willing to share it with their victims.

The occasion for Adiga’s excremental satire becomes clearer when we recall Frederic Jameson’s (1986) argument in “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism” that postcolonial authors were driven toward national allegory by a very particular set of disenchanting conditions: the shortcomings of anticolonial liberation (81). The “failure of the independence movement to develop into a general social revolution,” says Jameson, drove postcolonial authors to write in response to “the poisoned gift of independence,” whereupon they encountered an aesthetic dilemma: how to represent colonial adversaries and neocolonial “external controlling forces” that were no longer visible or identifiable as such? (81). Hence the use of national allegory: a mode of representation that bridges the public and the private, attempts to represent a whole that cannot ever be fully grasped, and uses nationalism as an organizational principle and foundationalism in the face of colonial-era defamation and capitalist atomization.

But as we have seen in the case of Balram, neoliberalism responds to that narrative form and its frequent recourse to sentimentality by rendering the presumably relatable national-allegorical individual—representative of a collective and its condition—into a ruthless upstart, a
new, monstrous role model and figure for the developing world. Adiga’s novel, then, takes as its point of departure a point in time not unlike the one Jameson describes, when the challenge is to expose the naturalized, often commonsensical neoliberal discourses and ideologies that normalize misanthropic self-interest into a reasonable ethical disposition today; but the novel also challenges by flipping the allegorical convention whereby the success or failure of a politically charged narrative is gauged according to social realist conventions and what those conventions presumably invoke in readers.

Adiga’s satirical strategy: what does it leave us with? Not much, admittedly, if we understand parodic satire as something that trumpets a univocal normative vision, produces the didactically definitive and definable, and uses social realist verisimilitude. Neoliberal disgust, after all, draws attention to what for Esty is the function of many excremental tropes in postcolonial scatological literature: to “register the tension between the demands of the ethical … subject and demands of the social collective” (44). Having “switched sides” and “now one of those who cannot be caught in India,” Balram ends his narrative by drawing the postcolonial tension between the individual and socius to its breaking point, identifying himself not as one of the untouchable communal defecators that gesture cynically against the subcontinent’s sordid state of affairs, but instead as one of the gangster-like—and so also untouchable—master cynical members of the elite class directing India’s political and economic future (275).

Balram’s provocative farewell to the reader—“I’ll never say I made a mistake that night in Delhi when I slit my master’s throat. I’ll say it was all worthwhile to know … what it means not to be a servant. I think I am ready to have children, Mr. Premier. Ha!”—is the victory shout of a neoliberalism that threatens to reproduce its ludic individualism in postcolonial India without an end in sight (276). But this is not to say that we as critics and readers should take this
provocation as a reason for defeatism. Far from it. That the novel ends on this cheeky and dour note asks us to ground our view of the novel’s postcolonial modernity gone monstrously awry in an unashamedly dystopic, and yet buoyantly ironic, perspective, one where we take full account of our bleak conditions in, and position against, a cynical capitalism perhaps best exposed through parody.
CONCLUSION

How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia

As we have seen, the genre of satire troubles the traditional understanding of allegory as a mode often attributed to postcolonial writing. That often Orientalist, universalizing attribution rests on the assumption that the postcolonial allegorical individual represents in correlative terms the struggles of a national condition and thus—at least within an anticlonial, idealist idiom—the revolutionary possibility of reconciling the individual’s desires and subjectivity to that of a socius (often figured as the nascent nation state). But by employing a satirical idiom that often posits a perennial tension between individual and socius, the texts we have discussed so far do not offer such allegories of reconciliation and hope. As rejoinders to anticlonial formulations of political hope and revolution, these novels question that very literary mode (at least as it is traditionally conceived). They question the extent to which discourse and representation today, in our seemingly post-revolutionary times, can mobilize allegory as a mode that attempts the politically idealistic act of yoking the individual to a collectivity—a laughable enterprise for cynical postcolonial satire, where the individual’s cynicism pierces the idealism that would posit the possibility of an unriven social and political community.

Whether the mode traditionally conceived might still function in a politically progressive fashion—or at all—is a question of recent and important interest. As Joseph notes in her reading of *The White Tiger*, the novel traces the shift of allegory from a national to a neoliberal frame in a way that does not posit the failure of allegorical representation wholesale. Instead, Adiga uses satire to reappropriate a form of allegory that has itself been reappropriated by neoliberalism: “In Adiga’s novel the double representation of allegory (as another meaning and political speech) is served no longer by making one voice stand for a collectivity as in representative politics but, rather, by the act of speaking otherwise—through the satiric possibility of ventriloquism or a
“speaking other” (91). Here the framing of satire as a form of “speaking otherwise” proves useful to rescuing the genre from accusations of nihilism and fatalism. For “speaking otherwise” might suggest the possibility of parodying neoliberalism’s post-historical, post-revolutionary mantras, using those mantras to critique neoliberalism’s attempts to naturalize itself as the last, postideological stage of history. This, at least, is one way to rescue cynical postcolonial satire from its critics, who are often wedded to the political viability, promise, and sincerity of allegory traditionally conceived. How, then, might we frame satire as a form of immanent critique that dispenses with a sincerity that loses rhetorical traction, and that might prove useful to hacking the neoliberal allegory from within?

The question is useful for discussing Mohsin Hamid’s recent novel, How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia (2013), which uses second-person narration to parody the genre of neoliberal self-help as a tool of subjectivation. Indeed, the novel uses second-person to mock the postmodern intellectual enterprise of “the politics of the self” as always-already co-opted by a neoliberalism that grew alongside that trend in thought (both were children of the 1970s and 80s). Cynical self-fashioning was part and parcel of neoliberalism’s subjectivizing entrance onto the postcolonial stage. If one offshoot of postmodern thought sought to rethink effective political and ethical action in the face of political failure, then in our time neoliberalism stays one step ahead, creating subjects who—as Adiga’s and Hamid’s protagonists do—self-fashion into opportunistic entrepreneurs who envision themselves within neoliberalism’s posthistorical, fatalistic horizon of expectation. What this means for those who dismiss self-fashioning as nothing to do with the “actually” political, as Edward Said famously does,59 is clear: we should reconsider the theory and turn toward self-fashioning as symptomatic of the neoliberal turn.
What Hamid’s novel illustrates: The self-help genre and neoliberal cynicism share blatantly self-interested premises and ideological frameworks that intertwine in ways we have yet to recognize as symptomatic of our entrepreneurship-obsessed age. Indeed, the novel uses its second-person perspective to configure the imaginary reader into an impoverished, go-getting protagonist looking to accomplish the title’s didactic promise. The didacticism here is thus ironic and nondidactic insofar as the novel teaches “you” what “you” should do to get ahead in a neoliberal world, dispensing with prescriptive, direct political commentary in favor of a diagnostic, indirect critique of neoliberalism. At once a Bildungsroman and traditional love story, the novel tracks “your” heroic rise from impoverished village life and near death as an enfeebled infant to financial success in a city known only as “rising Asia,” at times focusing directly on “your” love interests while at others zooming out to a sociological view of the infrastructural and economic changes sweeping over neoliberalizing Asia.

The novel thus works on two levels: the intensely personal (detailing a lifetime of ups and downs with “your” inamorata, known only as “the pretty girl”), and the abstraction of sociological analysis. The title and chapter headings promise banal advice on how to make your way to the top; yet the novel stubbornly withholds specificities in favor of keeping the story’s setting and figures as vague as possible. This opening disjuncture is a crucial narratological strategy, for it is “your” purposefully understated backdrop as well as the novel’s first object of critique: the neoliberal strategy of collapsing all Asian locales into a hazily defined post-national space, a tabula rasa for venture capitalism and corporatist interests. Today these spaces are created and shaped by transnational free trade communities which, as Timothy Luke reminds us, “create quite large, but very vaguely defined postnational spaces” that favor “the operational goals of large corporations … and global finance.”60
Hence the novel’s first joke at the reader’s expense: to render “you” and “your” story not individual, but prosaic. In doing so, the novel exposes neoliberalism’s ideology of entrepreneurial success as contradictory. Both rhetorically (each reader imagines his or herself within the novel’s space) and sociologically (taking place as it does in a time of sweeping economic and social change), “your” journey’s setting itself belies the fantasy of economic self-determination because completely not up to you yet requisite to your success. Born in this hollowed out space, “you,” who we find in the novel’s opening pages “huddled, shivering, on the packed earth under your mother’s cot” are infected with hepatitis E, “whose typical mode of transmission is fecal-oral. Yum. It kills only one in fifty, so you’re likely to recover,” seem not so special after all (4).

Yet the particularity of your scatological beginnings is crucial: your “fecal-oral” flirtation with death gives way not to a narrative of redemption or cleansing, but rather to an entrepreneurial malfeasance that entails a sordid laundry list of calculating practices that “you” pick up and institute on your way toward getting “filthy” rich. Given that “filthy” also describes the first obstacle you overcome (fecal-borne disease), we should pause for a moment to gloss the term as weaves its way into many of the novel’s subtle criticisms. “Your” journey, after all, consists first of escaping scatological hardship via entrepreneurial ambition; your escape thus requires internalizing and putting to work the “filthy” practices of bribery, nepotism, fraud, and racketeering—all of which the novel frames in didactic chapter titles such as “Befriend a Bureaucrat” and “Avoid Idealists” as requisite for success in rising Asia’s dystopic, opportunistic landscape. Over the course of the novel, neoliberal entrepreneurship and its cultural conditions and practices become quite the opposite of the panaceas to poverty and infrastructural
underdevelopment that they are so often touted as. Neoliberalism, you come to show us, causes and benefits from the very filth it claims clean up.

This, then, is the novel’s ironic narrative frame: “your” escape from abject poverty perpetuates the self-same, which is to say that you get out of poverty but not out of filth. Here the novel critiques neoliberal success as elitist, as possible for the cleansed few at the expense of the squalid many. The critique is an immanent one insofar as it occurs through “you,” the protagonist whose story is really a story about how she/he gets her hands dirty. Notice the narrative trick at play from the start: “You”—the assumed first world reader suddenly interested in a book about the developing world—learn over the course of the novel the neoliberal conditions of possibility behind your success as well as how to best maximize those conditions, meaning that the novel makes you aware of the cynical opportunism you never knew you had. The novel builds its way toward this critique of the imagined reader on the very first page by rendering paradoxical the fantasy of autonomous individualism undergirding the self-help genre: “Look, unless you’re writing one, a self-help book is an oxymoron. You read a self-help book so someone who isn’t yourself can help you, that someone being the author. This is true of the whole self-help genre. It’s true of how-to books, for example. And it’s true of personal improvement books too” (3). The passage’s cynical take on self-help is the first of its many meta-critiques of the genre, and for that reason frames those that follow it: “You,” right off the bat, are not the self-sufficient individual you thought you were, but instead parasitically depend upon the narrator’s insider cynicism, which you leech off of in the course of reading the self-help book in front of you. Little did you know that “your” relationship to the book at hand is cronyism at its purest.
The self-defeating and cronyistic fantasy of self-help also harbors a form of violence particular to and in the service of neoliberalism. For although self-help is, philosophically speaking, paradoxical, “None of the foregoing means self-help books are useless. On the contrary, they can be useful indeed. But it does mean that the idea of self in the land of self-help is a slippery one. And slippery can be good. Slippery can be pleasurable. Slippery can provide access to what would chafe if entered dry” (3-4). In this sexual metaphor, self-help represents the lubricant necessary for neoliberalism to penetrate social, cultural, and economic contexts that would otherwise “chafe if entered dry.” The passage suggests that neoliberal upstarts like “you” metaphorically lube up for rising Asia by reading the literature that provides “easy,” which is to say violent and forced, entry into that feminized, increasingly popular, and vaguely defined space, a space that in the popular imagination is more primed and ready than ever to be economically and culturally fucked by those with the proper lubricants, the proper “know how.” Little did you know—but you are starting to learn—that self-help requires not only another person, but also her likely violation.

Here, lubrication as savoir faire suggests something like a strategized rape and thus also—within a neoliberal context where networking is everything—the idiom of “greasing palms.” The metaphorical resemblance between the two works to critique neoliberalism’s investment in opportunistic individualism as its sole criterion for ethical action. For the genius of Hamid’s opening lubrication metaphor is its slickly paradoxical proposition that neoliberalism’s ideologies and subjects of self-care actually necessitate and come at the expense—indeed, even at the economic rape of—others. In our time, autonomous individualism has become the most prevalent of justifications for forcing economic and cultural doctrines on a majority that stands more to lose than to gain from those dogmas. Here, then, “greasing palms” functions as an idiom
that imagines a closed, anticommunitarian social system. Thatcher voiced this social system when she argued that there was “no such thing as society, only individual men and women” (qtd in Harvey 17). That this nepotistic system’s bureaucratic structure needs oiling from time to time in order to offer its agents easy “access” suggests an understated reality that the novel brings to the fore: the majority of us are at the mercy, but not in control of, neoliberal policies that fuck us—or are preparing to do so via slick ideological propositions—whether we know it or not.

Within the story, “you,” who follow step-by-step the advice offered in each chapter, are the archetypal palm greaser. More to the point, you, the actual reader, are interpellated as a cynic on an extradiagetic level by virtue of reading the book in the first place. If, as Margaret Thatcher once commented, “Economics are the method, but the object is to change the soul,” then the novel sets you up as precisely that soul. Hence the novel’s opening critique of the imagined first world reader as undeniably cynical and self-interested (indeed, why else would “you” read a self-help book about the developing world?):

It’s remarkable how many books fall into the category of self-help. Why, for example, do you persist in reading that much-praised, breathtakingly boring foreign novel, slogging through page after page after please-make-it-stop page of tar-slow prose and blush-inducing formal conceit, if not out of an impulse to understand distant lands that because of globalization are increasingly affecting life in your own? What is this impulse of yours, at its core, if not a desire for self-help? (19)

The passage frames the category of self-help—even the act of reading itself—as cynically motivated, exposing the selfsame on the part of the imagined reader, which is to say all of us: the novel’s “formal conceit” induces blushing on our part because of the ashamedly self-seeking
nature, audience, and function of self-help. Riding the back of this meta-critique of reading as cynically motivated is a critique of the historical conditions of possibility behind the first-world readership’s curiosity toward the developing world: globalization. Framing the trendy phenomenon of literature about the developing world as an “impulse,” a “desire for self-help,” the passage implies that there is something new about the kind of subject that finds the third world interesting to begin with. And while the passage above frames globalization as making the developing world thinkable, worthwhile, and readable (in both senses) for the first world, it also suggests that all reading practices are in themselves cynically motivated and—returning to the lubrication metaphor for a moment—forms of savoir faire potentially useful for abusing a feminized and “available” geopolitical space that is the condition of possibility behind your success: “Indeed, all books each and every book written, could be said to be offered to the reader as a form of self-help. Textbooks, *those whores*, are particularly explicit in acknowledging this” (20; my emphasis).

Here the novel banishes the reader’s presumption of narrative distance by suturing them into a *mise en scène* where cynicism today drives even the ostensibly enlightening, humanist practice of reading and learning about the other. Using the “textbook whore” as its central metaphor for the cynical utility of, and potential for domination behind, self-help, the novel opens its fourth chapter, “Avoid Idealists,” with a more direct satirical commentary on neoliberal cynicism, which in rising Asia is a hegemonic philosophy and ontology. It does so by warning “you,” an aspiring entrepreneur, to avoid idealism, the bane of every upstart:

Surely ideals, transcending as they do puny humans and repositing meaning in vast abstract concepts instead, are by their very nature anti-self? It follows therefore that any self-help book advocating allegiance to an ideal is likely to be a
sham. Yes, such self-help books are numerous, and yes, it’s possible some of them do help a self, but more often than not, the self they help is their writer’s self, not yours. So you’d do well to stay away, particularly if getting filthy rich tops your list of priorities (57).

Ideals necessarily escape the reach of “puny humans” because they are “anti-self,” meaningful only in the form of inaccessible “vast abstract concepts.” This is the novel’s—and neoliberalism’s—cynical ontology: in a universe where puny, self-interested humans face off against inaccessibly “vast abstract concepts,” ideals are always charades because used to dupe the naïve, and because unreachably transcendental. The passage all the while reminds you, the reader of self-help, that you’re the real sucker here whether you know it or not: For the “writer’s self” who benefits from purchasing Hamid’s novel is not, of course, “yours,” but the sly narrator’s. Hence the implication: self-help is the neoliberal literary genre par excellence—one especially ubiquitous today because a useful form of subjectivation. For the genre does less to “help you” in real economic or practical terms than convince you of the power and normalcy of your autonomous individualism, which in turn helps the author who rakes in the profits and is, lest you forget, the real entrepreneur here. The contemporary phantasmagorias of self-help and entrepreneurial success lie always in the imaginary, in the words on the printed page or screen, the purchase of which ironically benefits you least of all.

Following this meta-critique of writing, reading, and us, the cynical-yet-duped readers, the novel next diagnoses the middle-class cynicism rampant in rising Asia:

What’s true of self-help books is equally, and inevitably, true of people. Just as self-help books spouting idealism are best avoided, people doing so should be given wide berths too. These idealists tend to congregate around universities.
There they find an amenable environment of young, impressionable, malcontented individuals, individuals who … give corporeal form to the term sucker (57-8).

In rising Asia, “idealists”—a sardonic euphemism for education, academics, and their highly touted “ideals”—parasitically leech off of weary though still “impressionable” university students. Here the novel pans out to a sociological view of institutionalized cynicism, one where the academy and its “idealist” proponents (whom, following David Mazella, we should call “insider cynics”) search for an “amenable” demographic to exploit.62 As we shall soon see, the postcolonial university exploits this demographic not only economically, but also via its own form of subjectification.

Indeed, the university student “suckers” described above become more cynical than they already were because they must accept the terms (by falling victim to or taking advantage of) socially normalized malfeasance, which is now integral to a social structure and historical moment in rising Asia where

State subsidized though it may be, your university is exquisitely attuned to money. A small payment and exam invigilators are willing to overlook neighborly cheating. More and someone else can be sat in your seat to write your paper. More still and no writing is needed, blank exam books becoming, miraculously, a first class result. So you have grown a beard and joined an organization (60).

Here, state corruption, classism, and nepotism—catalysts of mass political cynicism, to be sure—catalyze “your” own cynical turn toward Islamic fundamentalism. The university, after all, is “no easy proposition for a young man from a background such as yours. Nepotism is not restricted to swaggering about in its crudest, give-my-son-what-he-wants form. It frequently assumes more
cunning guises, attire, for example, or an accent. Despite your previous academic results, and your familiarity with a wide range of personal styles and affectations from film, there was no hiding the fact that you were the son of a servant” (59). Unable to muster the cultural capital that confers neoliberal favor in rising Asia—figured in the passage as proper fashion sense, somatic disposition, and apposite twang—you choose the easier route by “growing a beard.” If brevity is the soul of wit, then the tersely phrased act of “growing a beard” frames your Islamic fundamentalism as a comically affected decision—above all a cynical, aesthetic choice bereft of “true” belief. And although the reference to Islamic fundamentalism here faintly suggests (as do a few other references sprinkled throughout the story) that the novel takes place in Pakistan, it is important to keep in mind the narrator’s constant recourse to calling your locale “rising Asia”:

The point in doing so is to mimic and draw attention to the consequences of the neoliberal remapping of the developing world. The novel repurposes rising Asia’s vagueness in order to level a more general critique of neoliberalism’s cultural, institutional, and infrastructural effects on an equally generalized part of the world.

“Your” Islamic fundamentalism—here framed as a byproduct of market fundamentalism—is cynical to the core because chosen for the sole reason that “your organization is, like all organizations, an economic enterprise. The product it sells is power” (61). In the novel’s vision of rising Asia, religious fundamentalism is less a politicized medium of authentic, metaphysical belief and more a commoditized “economic enterprise” and “product” useful for fighting against nepotism and other disenfranchising neoliberal social norms. This reading of Islamic fundamentalism as systemically produced and class-based is interesting in its own right because contrary to the popular and Orientalist naturalization of fundamentalism as an ahistorical, cultural, and racial atavistic perversion. Within rising Asia’s dog-eat-dog world you
decide to become “part of something larger, something righteous” only in order to avoid being “an isolated, impoverished individual, weak prey for the socially strong,” nothing more or less (61). In our postcolonial time, the novel suggests, fundamentalism emerges as a defense mechanism against neoliberalism’s disenfranchising, cynicism-producing institutions.

The symbolic capital you wield with a beard alone represents the first of the novel’s decisions to give a historical and cultural specificity to the rise of cynicism on the part of the aspiring rural working class from which “you” come. Recall, for example, that “your father was adamant that you complete secondary school” mostly because he “recognized that in the city manliness is caught up in education” (59). In the cities of rising Asia—which are ever-growing because of increased migration from the rural—the aspiring underclasses know and must try to internalize the cynical reality that urban masculinity and nepotism-fueled success go hand-in-greasy-hand. This is to say that neoliberalism today often takes the form of a culturally coded savoir-faire forced upon the poor:

Burly though he is, your father had spent a working lifetime in the service of employers who, were the world a festival of unarmed banditry, he would have beaten, bound, and relieved of their possessions in a few quick minutes. He understood that his employers benefited from two things that he lacked, advanced schooling and rampant nepotism. Unable to give his children the latter, he did all he could to ensure that at least one of you acquired the former (59).

“Your” father’s rural masculinity ceases to function in a time where neoliberal cultural codes strategically exclude would-be social climbers, not to mention the poor wholesale. The impotence of your father’s rural masculinity in rising Asia—though once useful in a rural milieu—comments on the perceived impotence of (and thus cynicism toward) what is earlier
referred to as the peasant countryside’s “brute force and anger.” Better to get with the program of urban masculinity, the novel cheekily suggests from your neoliberal perspective, than believe in a rural proletarian rage that no longer foments revolution.

The postcolonial university—and especially “your” cynical navigation of its nepotistic systems via fashion, urban masculinity, and Islamic fundamentalism—recall Peter Sloterdijk’s diagnosis that modern cynicism is systematized schizophrenia, and its subjects self-conscious schizoids:

Cynicism proceeds by way of a diffusion of the subject of knowledge, so that the present day servant of the system can very well do with the right hand what the left never allowed. By day, colonizer, at night, colonized; by occupation, valorizer and administrator, during leisure time, valorized and administered; officially a cynical functionary, privately a sensitive soul; at the office a giver of orders, ideologically a discussant; outwardly a follower of the reality principle, inwardly a subject oriented toward pleasure (113).

Although Sloterdijk’s diagnosis that modern cynicism is schizophrenic emerged as a criticism of 1980’s European disillusionment as byproduct of and toward the Cold War and the rise of neoliberalism, formulations like the one above speak to a political rationality that is more generalizable today because that rationality, in Brown’s words, “exceeds particular positions on particular issues” (“End of Liberal Democracy”). Here, then, we must momentarily bracket the important work of contextualizing the cultural effects of such policies on postcolonial locales only because this is precisely what Hamid’s vague geopolitical landscape asks of us.

Perhaps the act of bracketing is the primary act cynical postcolonial satire asks of us—that we abandon for a brief moment the often anti-intellectual impulse to yoke cultural
representation to our political beliefs. Such bracketing proves especially difficult insofar as it goes against some primary tenets of postcolonial studies—for example, the need to ground claims in a rigorously historical and contextualized way, and to speak truth to power. These sincere methodological imperatives are indispensable to worthwhile scholarship, but might also be limiting when reading a genre that often dispenses with sincerity.

What, then, does cynical postcolonial satire leave us with? Not much, admittedly, if we understand satire as something that produces the didactically definitive and definable, that fulfils the criterion of authenticity or social realist verisimilitude desired by those still tied to the narrative forms and principles used by anticolonialists—and understandably so given that era’s contagious confidence in the future to come. But maybe cynical satire’s ironic gift is precisely its ability to find a reason for critique in seemingly post-critical times—and in a humorous way at that. Cynical postcolonial satire refuses easy answers to political questions because there are none, and cheekily agrees with the worst of things because no hope, which is to say hopelessness for hope’s sake, is perhaps the last form of optimism given our cynical times. Or not.
NOTES


5 Instructive in this regard is Neil Lazarus’ reminder that “Many scholars active in postcolonial studies are, indeed, positively cynical about decolonization and national liberation. As Aijaz Ahmed—who dislikes this cynicism—has rightly complained, the tendency in contemporary scholarship is to focus not on the “revolutionary heroism” that was everywhere in evidence in the anticolonial struggle, but on the setbacks and defeats that have followed in the years since independence” (33). See “The Global Dispensation Since 1945,” in The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies. Cambridge: Cambridge, UP: 2004.

6 Useful here is Derek Wright’s framing of what many of Africa’s disillusioned satirists found so risible in the wake of decolonization: “In the place of a constructive political ideology and training in multiparty parliamentary practices, Africans were given high-sounding rhetoric, personality cults that urged them to identify their charismatic leaders’ personal fortunes with their own, and nostalgic communalist myths that, under the guise of socialism, would shortly be used to entrench totalitarian political systems” (38). “African Literature and Post-independence Disillusionment,” in Irel, Abiola, and Simon Gikandi, eds. The Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004.

7 Exemplary here is Horace’s infamous reminder: “No one is without faults.” As one of the best critics of satire to date—Claude Rawson—notes, self-implication is characteristic of Swift’s satire: “Swift … was a proleptic master of the Shandean self-conscious novel and other modes of modern writing … That Swift not only understood the impulse, but was capable of giving private expression to what he derided in public, is another demonstration of his perpetual self-implication in the objects of his own satire” (94). See Swift’s Angers. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2014.

8 Armah’s novel might not critique neoliberalism per se, but it does satirize primarily the deleterious influence of global capitalism on postcolonial Ghanaians.


11 Here we might want to think about the function of something such as strategic essentialism, which as Gayatri Spivak explains, knows full well that it barter in homogenizing and essentializing identity categories, but argues for the usefulness and necessity of those categories for some forms of political action. This, at least, is one way Brown’s formulation of praxis functions in a postcolonial context.

12 The PMLA panel’s preoccupation with reinterpreting postcolonial studies in light of neoliberalism and other globalizing phenomena that trouble anticolonial frameworks is not a new one. Ania Loomba’s (2005) is one of the earliest and most emblematic of these reinterpretations. And her framing of this urgency resounds with our purposes here: “Since the events of 11 September 2001, and the US invasions of Afghanistan, questions of ‘empire’ are more urgent than ever, as advocates of the ‘new American empire’ exhort the US to learn from European imperialism, while its critics warn that the murderous history of colonialism is being whitewashed all over again. Is postcolonial studies redundant in this new world?” (1). In Colonialism/Postcolonialism.

13 Any preliminary reading of satire’s basic tenets will include, for example, the superiority thesis: that, following a Hobbesian model of human nature, satire expresses and fulfills our desire to ridicule and demean others. Griffin’s remarks on the pleasures of satire are yet another useful starting point for discussing why postcolonial satire chooses its enjoyable yet often vexing mode of expression. Drawing on Dryden’s comparison of Horace and Juvenal—that the latter “gives me as much Pleasure as I can bear”—Griffin argues that the remark is a “salutary reminder that
satire, like all other forms of literature, is aimed to please. No matter how instructive, the work that does not please will be thrown away unread” (160). While I do not necessarily agree with the broad brush that Griffin uses here, I think he makes a strong point: satire is rhetorically useful insofar as it satisfies us in any number of ways. This brings us back to Sloterdijk’s diagnosis of our cynical modernity and the need for forms of expression and critique that refuse to perpetuate an already debilitating fatalism. Satire is first on the list when discussing such forms of expression.

16 For more on this, one of Quayson’s main objects of study throughout his career, see Ato Quayson, ”Self-Writing and Existential Alienation in African Literature: Achebe’s Arrow of God.” *Research in African Literatures* 42.2, Achebe’s World: African Literature at Fifty (2011).
19 One can find Morton’s clearest and most useful explanation of this concept—which makes its way throughout his recent work—in *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality* (2013).
20 For more on the concept of slavery and the *osa* in the novel, and in Achebe’s fiction more generally, see Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi, ”Chinua Achebe and the Uptakes of African Slaveries,” *Research in African Literatures* 40.4, 2009: 25-46.
21 Joel D. Barkan, Michael L. McNulty, and M.A.O. Ayeni (1991) provide a short and useful historical background to the rise of African hometown associations: ”In a pattern similar to that which unfolded elsewhere in Africa, initial efforts at self-help development in Nigeria were a response to the unwillingness of the colonial state to provide social welfare services widely, and coincided with the rise of African nationalism in the period immediately before and after World War II” (463). Note, for example, Pierre Landell-Mills’s more optimistic interpretation: ”The proliferation of associations at all levels … is a powerful factor constraining abusive central government authorities and the predatory conduct of dominant elites. By empowering groups throughout society to both voice their concerns and take direct action to achieve their ends, the trend is strongly in favour of more participatory politics, greater public accountability, and hence basic democracy,” in ”Governance, Cultural Change, and, Empowerment,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 30.4 (1992): 543-67, 563.
23 In this way, *No Longer* helps reframe and pushes against Joseph E. Obi’s prototypical, somewhat hasty claim that Africa’s literature of disillusionment suffers from a ”poverty of vision,” making it ”[fall] short of the demands of critique,” by which he means that such literature does not enact a form of what he calls ”proper criticism (i.e., criticism informed by a clearly worked out normative position) [that] replaces the object of critique with an alternative view” (400-1). See Joe E. Obi, ”A Critical Reading of the Disillusionment Novel.” *Journal of Black Studies* 20.4 (1990): 399-413.
25 Stuart Hall’s *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (1988) corroborates this observation in the case of Thatcher. For Hall, Thatcherism was able to garner so much support, even among laborers and the working class, not because it effected extreme cases of false consciousness by pulling the wool over its victims’ eyes, but because it was able to articulate ”contradictory discourses within the same ideological formation” (10).
26 For more on this distinction, see Wendy Brown’s ”American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservativism, and De-Democratization” (1996).
27 For more on Thatcher’s infamous enterprise culture, see John R. Short’s tellingly titled ”Yuppies, Yuffies and the New Urban Order” (1989).
28 When resistance means unveiling, we also miss how ideology can function at the level of unconscious external belief—in action and habit—and thus not necessarily in conscious thought. For more on this strand of recent thinking, often put under the aegis of ”postideology,” ”posthegemony,” and ”postpolitics,” see Zizek, Beasley, and Althusser as cited here.
29 These categories come from Jane Bennet’s short essay “The Moraline Drift,” in *The Politics of Moralizing*. 
31 “Cynicism,” David Mazella argues, “feeds upon its remedies,” by which he means that we should not be so quick to discount cynics because we fear that their often wholesale damnations of the status quo threatens politics and the ever-receding dream of democracy altogether. When we do, we fall prey to a moralism that discounts widespread, and not unjustified, suspicion toward the political, reinforcing “the cynical belief that popular feelings have no effect on the workings of the political system” (footnote 16 Mazella).

32 Most scholars read the show and Chamcha’s participation in it either as commentary on the postmodern condition or as evidence of his misplaced Anglophilia—of why we should frown on his mimetic profession as a voice-over actor who “ruled the waves of Britain” as a disembodied voice never seen by racist Britain, “the big star whose face is the wrong colour for their colour TVs” (61). Such criticisms miss a major thrust of the novel—nicely summed up in Rushdie’s claim that it is “a love song to our mongrel selves”—while implicitly assenting to the moralistic view of Chamcha reiterated by the show’s “black radicals,” who label him a “Brown Uncle Tom” (267). They miss Rushdie’s suggestion that although the malleability of identity suggested in the act of mimicry might be a vehicle for internalizing feelings of cultural and racial inferiority, is also is the vehicle to resist that self-same power.

33 Several critics note that Thatcher’s regime represented a break with older political logics so great that it bewildered the Left. For Jessop et al. the Left “did not really grasp the magnitude of the break … intended by Thatcherman,” while for Corner and Harvey (1991) Thatcher represented an “irreversible break” from older Keynesian political logics and economic structures. The title of Stuart Hall’s Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left: The Hard Road to Renewal (1988) says it all.

34 For more on the complex and mutually constitutive relationship between these two political rationalities see Brown’s “American Nightmare.”

35 The UK’s infamous string of moral panics among its white citizens—the mugging panic of the early 1970s prime among them—could be said to have inspired the counter-moralism of the New Social movements.

36 There, Harvey notes the challenge that Neoliberalism presents to identity politics and those modes of analysis wedded to its systems of thinking: “Neoliberal rhetoric, with its foundational emphasis upon individual freedoms, has the power to split off libertarianism, identity politics, multi-culturalism, and eventually narcissistic consumerism from the social forces ranged in pursuit of social justice through the conquest of state power. It has long proved extremely difficult within the US left, for example, to forge the collective discipline required for political action to achieve social justice without offending the desire of political actors for individual freedom and for full recognition and expression of particular identities. Neoliberalism did not create these distinctions, but it could easily exploit, if not foment, them” (41).

37 When discussing satirists or comedians, the question of “authenticity” usually gets asked under the rubric of a joke’s “intent.” Insofar as this move rehashes the time before Foucault and the notion of the intentional fallacy, it illustrates that we’ve yet to fully understand these genres on their own terms, outside of the biographical recourse to seeing the artist’s identity as bound in a one-to-one correlation with the “meaning” of her work.

38 This is not to say that critique should jettison its polemical elements. Quite the opposite. Powell’s infamous speech—a quintessential expression of English resentment toward its postcolonial others, and nostalgia toward its faded imperial past—also finds its way into the novel’s framing of itself as a nonmoralistic yet scurril satirical. In the “Jahilia” episode of the novel that describes a fictionalized seventh-century Mecca, that city’s chief and legendary satirist—often seen as Rushdie himself—states that his is a “poet’s work … to name the unnamable, to point at frauds, to take sides, to start arguments, shape the world and stop it from going to sleep.’ And if rivers of blood flow from the cuts his verses inflict, then they will nourish him. He is the satirist, Baal” (97). Thus exciting moralism from political critique is about using the “neutral” for the sake of not stirring the pot, or minimizing one’s convictions, as those who wish to retain the mantle of righteousness might argue; it means, rather, that in resentful times (which ones aren’t?) effective political critique breaks through what Raymond Williams called the “structures of feeling” that are part and parcel of a gestalt’s regime of power. It means, as Baal implies in his allusion to Powell’s rivers of blood, naming the unnamable and reappropriating language as a condition of resistance, a task not exactly made easier by those whose impulse to punish makes its way into arguments for censorship.

39 We see this even more clearly when Chamcha interacts with a protestor at the rally who is wearing a badge that says, depending on the angle, either “Uhuru for the Simba” or “Freedom for the Lion.” “It’s on account of the meaning of the chosen name,’ she explained redundantly. ‘In African.’ Which language? Saladin wanted to know. It was African: born, by the sound of her, in Lewisham or Deptford or New Cross, that was all she needed to know … Pamela hissed into his ear. ‘I see you finally found somebody to feel superior to.’ She could still read him like a book” (413; my emphasis).
In Brown’s words, Left moralism renders us “opposed to the measured, difficult, and deliberate action that implicates rather than enacts the self” (23). Because it lacks a larger vision that might constitute a more radical critique of our disenchanting present, moralism is as an impoverished and derivative rhetoric that misrecognizes “the political logic organizing the world” because it is a “symptom of political paralysis in the face of radical … disorientation and [is] a kind of hysterical mask for the despair that attends such paralysis” (29).

Notice how Rushdie’s detractors and even his more ambivalent and positive critics resort less to close reading his satirical methods and more to describing the author’s presumed smugness and elitism toward his Muslim audience. This is telling, for even when these ad hominem attacks with good reason take into account Rushdie’s Eurocentric and even orientalist public reactions to the affair, they abstract away from the crucial work of reading the novel on its own terms. Had they done so they may have sooner understood what Feroza F.Jussawalla brilliantly argues in her 1996 article “Rushdie’s Dastan-e-Dilrub: The Satanic Verses As Rushdie’s Love Letter to Islam.” For Jussawalla, the novel’s resolutely Indo-Islamic narrative structure, content, and sensibility were jettisoned, on the one hand, by postcolonial critics invested in western discourses of hybridity and colonialism, who ignored the novel’s numerous and central references to Mughal colonialism and cultural mixing in the subcontinent. On the other hand, the novel’s Indo-Islamism was obscured by those blind to Rushdie’s decision to draw on the Islamic tradition of satire endemic to the hybridized Islam of the Mughals of India. And even if it is the case that close reading will never, in Jussawalla’s words, “absolve the writer of his ‘sins’ in [fundamentalist] Islamic eyes,” this chapter doubles down on her faith in the practice of close reading, especially insofar as the analysis attempted here proposes that the text of The Satanic Verses self-consciously justifies and enumerates its own satiric strategies.

Paul Brian’s dictionary on The Verses explains many of Rushdie’s allusions in detailed ways no other scholar has yet attempted.

And as Almond goes on to note, “In this essay, written in a Thatcherite Britain obsessed with privatization and trade union control, Rushdie shows an unusual degree of sympathy in this depiction of a prophet struggling for the preservation of old, caring values in the face of ruthless, free-market forces” (98).

Here is a link to the scene: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rUOkPKli20k. Note that the screenplay is Kureishi’s while the film was directed by Stephen Frears—this is the same set-up the two had in My Beautiful Laundrette.

Hence the film’s use of irony, which critiques a hip, identity-political moralism while avoiding the self-same. This is not to say that the New Times is exclusively aligned with the politics of positive images. Quite the opposite. Many of its writers and advocates—Kureishi, Hall, and Paul Gilroy, to name a few—rejected that politics from the beginning. But it is to say that the moralism of the New Left found its way into an iteration of the New Times that demanded the replacement of negative images with positive ones.

Exemplary in this regard is Sivanandan’s declaration that the “self that New Timers make so much play about is a small, selfish, inward-looking self that finds pride in lifestyle, exuberance in consumption, and commitment in pleasure—and then elevates them all into a politics of this and that, positioning itself this way and that way (with every position a politics and every politics a position)” (49).

Here are two representative examples of such charges: the first is Kenyan-Indian-British filmmaker Gurinder Chadha’s argument that Kureishi is a race-traitor insofar as he is “quite isolated from the Asian side of himself. If there’s one criticism of him, it’s that he’s used the side of himself without real cultural integrity” (29). The second is the opening of hooks’ piece, which clearly has Kureishi in mind: “Colonization made of us the colonized—participants in daily rituals of power where we, in strict sado-masochistic fashion, find pleasure in ways of being and thinking, ways of looking at the world that reinforce and maintain our positions as the dominated” (155). The ways in which Gurinder and hooks distance themselves from Kureishi as an alienated, pitiable subject is typically moralist insofar as the implication is that they are not isolated from their constituencies but rather organically connected to them as their righteous representatives.

Importantly, hooks condemns Laundrette in the same idiom as Sammy and Rosie.

Exemplary in this regard is a recent Telegraph piece titled “Margaret Thatcher: The Entrepreneurs’ Prime Minister,” and which claims that “Baroness Thatcher was, indubitably, the outstanding champion of British enterprise in the last 30 years. A mould-breaker, she also led the way in showing immigrants like myself that we could succeed, prosper, and excel. That influence has been a powerful one for the United Kingdom’s Asian community. A community that had come, like the Ugandan Asians thrown out by a brutal dictator in the late 1970s, with nothing but who during Margaret Thatcher’s Prime Ministership were able to prosper and succeed, because of the enterprise environment and the aspiration environment she initiated and championed” (Telegraph).
For Timothy Corrigan, for example, the film “aims to empower … viewers by offering the utopian possibility of refurbing … that space of distraction and appropriation according to shared needs and wishes of shifting social alliances and subjectivities” (227).

Here’s a link to the clip: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fc98UVUjLs


Important to note is the backdrop of these opening scenes: a gloomy England riddled with waste, makeshift camps, and abandoned cars—the effects of Thatcher’s gutting of social welfare programs.

Hussein, Omar’s father and Nasser’s brother, represents the opposite of Nasser’s post-identitarian, anti-communist Thatcherism.

In this way, England’s postcolonial future hauntingly resembles its past, for Omar’s “armada of launderettes” represents a throwback revenge that deploys a form of British colonial power against Britain itself.

However much he might recognize that the film ends on a “fairly bleak” note, Rahul K. Gairola misses the force of Kureishi’s irony when he argues that “Johnny and Omar, an interracial, gay couple, radically resist such qualified calls for belonging in their new ‘home’ country by rejecting traditional home spaces that re-inscribe capitalist logic by privileging patriarchal heteronormativity and by praising South Asian immigrants’ assimilation” (51).

Important to note is that melancholia is itself—whether that of Britain or the disillusioned Left—is ironic insofar as such “attachment to the object of one’s sorrowful loss supersedes the desire to recover from this loss, to live free of it in the present, to be unburdened by it” (Brown, *Out of History*, 169). By this logic, one cannot break the ironic structure of melancholia by replacing its object of desire with another that would only reify that structure.

Useful here is Edward Said’s diagnosis of two tendencies symptomatic of his cultural moment in the early 90s: suspicion toward the concept of self-fashioning as a viable political model and the proliferation of narratives of anticolonial failure: “The later Jean-Francois Lyotard and Michel Foucault … describe a striking new lack of faith in … the great legitimizing narratives of emancipation and enlightenment … Foucault … turned his attention away from the oppositional forces in modern society … and decided that it was probably better to concentrate on the micro-physics of power that surround the individual. The self was therefore to be studied, cultivated, and, if necessary, refashioned and constituted. In both Lyotard and Foucault we find precisely the same trope employed to explain the disappointment in the politics of liberation: narrative, which posits an enabling beginning point and a vindicating goal, is no longer adequate for plotting the human trajectory in society. There is nothing to look forward to: we are stuck within our circle. And now the line is enclosed by a circle. After years of support anti-colonial struggles … which came to represent for many intellectuals their deepest engagement in the politics and philosophy of anti-imperialist decolonization, a moment of exhaustion and disappointment was reached. One began to hear and read how futile it was to supports revolutions, how barbaric were the new regimes that came to power” (26-7). This diagnosis is instructive insofar as it attributes postcolonial disillusionment in the wake of decolonization not simply to the disenchanting shortcomings of those movements, but also to the poststructuralist fatigue with the politics of identity and social liberation. Said describes how postmodern cynicism toward narrative’s inadequacy in the age of failed grand narratives poses a danger to anti- and postcolonialists, for whom telling and keeping alive narratives of social and political emancipation is more necessary than ever. Poststructuralist cynicism and the “exhaustion and disappointment” spread by it, he implies, are contagions we must avoid at all costs. For what soon follows narratives of anticolonial failure is the assumed exhaustion of narrative itself as a medium and form of political resistance, producing a defeatism that echoes the political cynicism identified with the postmodern turn: Inadequacy of narrative implies the inadequacy of not only the intellectuals who study narratives and representation, but also the inadequacy of social emancipation itself as a worthwhile concept.

Timothy Luke, “Localized spaces, Globalized places;” in *The Rise of East Asia: Critical Visions of the Pacific Century*, eds. Mark Berger, Douglas Borer (New York: Routledge, 1997): 257. As Luke goes on to note, within such spaces “jobs will be relocated in the name of global efficiency; environmental objectives will be loosened to enhance everyone’s income; peasant uprisings will be undercut to support incumbent authorities tottering from internal crises and contradictions” (257). These, then, are the unstated background conditions in which the novel takes place.

To say that neoliberalism functions as both a norm and ontology—as this chapter does—is admittedly controversial. Brown, for example, argues that “neo-liberalism develops institutional practices and rewards for exacting” its vision of society dominated by a market political rationality. Thus neoliberalism “involves a normative rather than ontological claim about the pervasiveness of economic rationality … [it is] a constructivist project: it does not presume the ontological givenness of a thoroughlygoing economic rationality for all domains of society but rather takes as its task the development, dissemination, and institutionalization of such a rationality.” Here Brown
expresses her Foucaultian understanding of neoliberalism as a form of governmentality, whose task is to avoid overt forms of control and power by forming subjects that normalize themselves according to market conditions. Yet one aporia in Brown’s otherwise compelling and nuanced definition of neoliberalism as a constructivist project (and thus one that does not, in her view, appeal to a neo-conservatist moral or religious foundationalism, i.e., a neo-con ontology)—is that neoliberalism creates and draws on ideologies that naturalize a market political rationality vis a vis forms of the naturalist fallacy, Darwinian naturalism being one of the most popular. And in both Hamid’s and Adiga’s satires, their use of animal imagery and species language expose neoliberalism as a pervasive political rationality that necessarily entails a dog-eat-dog worldview, for how else would it rationalize its paradoxes and hypocrisy? The distinction between norm and ontology in this case is therefore a false one.

David Mazella, The Making of Modern Cynicism, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007). Mazella’s definition of insider cynicism is useful for our purposes here: Insider cynics are “the cynical mediators, the ‘insiders’ who help confer legitimacy upon the powerful. Members of this group mimic the cynicism of the powerful, but more from fear of losing their position of security than from any power seeking of their own. These are the alienated middlemen, the professional shapers of public opinion and redescribers of reality who are given the job of creating and sustaining the illusions that allow the powerful to rule” (10). Mazella’s nuanced taxonomy of cynics—like Sloterdijk’s and those of others—are important to keep in mind in any analysis of cynicism, for this social and psychological phenomenon varies (as all social and psychological phenomena within a historic-social matrix do) according to always-shifting social positionings and norms.

For more on rage as proletarian affect and its history in political struggles see Sloterdijk, Rage and Time: A Psychopolitical Investigation, trans. Mario Wenning, (New York: Columbia UP, 2010).


https://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v007/7.1brown.html


http://postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/view/508


