

6 Haunting, Resonance, and Requiem for Otium: Contemporary South Asian Literature

The previous chapter indicated that by the late twentieth century, negotiations of leisure and idleness had undergone severe transformations in the context of South Asia. It is not surprising that new formulations of otium – now even more sharply distinguished as leisure and idleness – tend to fall largely into narratives of consumption and consumerism, given the context of globalisation of free market trade and India's plunge into economic liberalisation in 1991. It is not that capitalism was not a formidable force before this decade. However, the sudden societal transformations due to the onset of the neoliberal economy witnessed new dimensions and possibilities – inadvertently related to the market – in concepts of indolence, idleness, and leisure. These economic shifts have already been projected in international travel narratives of the *bhadralok* cosmopolitan sleuth in Chapter 5. The socio-economic changes – at least in India – were followed by a psychological and emotional shift in how people thought of possibly free/idle time in terms of value exchange, leisure activities, and wasteful idleness.³⁵⁶ This shift can be noticed in semantic transformations, too, mainly in enhancing the taboos on laziness and idleness – in contrast to notions of the good life as successful, treading the path of Western/American notions of success as economic success, and in the rise of leisure centres and activities as value goods and services. An inseparable aspect of these transformations was the augmentation of discrimination in society, especially class-based discrimination, with a shift in ideals and values of the aspirational Indian middle class.

The above discussion draws our attention back to the significant question of exclusion and otium, now located within a new axis of power relations in South Asia's post-Independence, postcolonial, globalised context. This new axis can be seen as derived from traditions of power and oppression, formulated in

³⁵⁶ For a concise summary of the transformation of Gandhian and Nehruvian ideals in India after 1991 and how such transformations had a significant impact on a new characterisation of the Indian middle class based on consumption patterns, see Christophe Jaffrelot & Peter van der Veer (2008) and Christiane Brosius (2012).

what Tabish Khair reads as “Otherness”, with reference to postcolonialism and Gothic, at once relating to the past but also to the present context of rigid demarcations of the self and the other (2009: 3–6). In this set-up, where forms of leisure become heavily commercialised and privileged, leisure experiences for certain sections of society are made possible, now increasingly, at the expense of other social sections. I first present a brief understanding of the contexts of othering and discriminating, within which, through emotional engagements, literature manifests otium – or rather, its metamorphosis. This metamorphosis is initiated as both a privileged politics of the past and a product of the bigoted politics of the present. The shift can be located in the recurrent feeling of being ‘haunted’ by the very idea of otium as a concept of the self: otium returns and recurs in the form of spectres addressing the self. While as a concept, otium undergoes massive transformation, it becomes a highly contested concept, wedged in the conflict between loss of significance as an emotional relation in the competitive, accelerated, capitalist era, emerging as a concept-tool of critique, in manifestations of the revenant, reasserting the severed past and unable to detach from the present. These hauntings render otium immensely relevant to the present and the future and the relations between them.

6.1 Otium, Marginalisation, and Contemporary Prose in South Asia

In this socio-economic context of augmented inequalities, the challenges of acceleration in a globalised world need to be attuned even more sharply with an understanding of the privileged aspect of otium as a social-personal capacity – *a function of the self* and an aspect of *self-determination*. These environments of exclusion reveal the urgent and increasing need to explore otium and its function in society. The present study, at this final stage, is not involved in tracing an exhaustive account of otium within this recent transformation; that will have to be a separate exercise which thoroughly investigates the socio-economic transformations following 1991 in India and in the subcontinent in later years and examine the impact of these shifts in detail. However, what this chapter will do, with some provocation and caution, is foreground the question of otium’s relevance in this yet another transformative time. Therefore, in this Janus-faced final chapter, which looks back and looks forward at a new context, I explore some significant literary clusters, readings, and observations to wrap up this study and open space for further research on the topic.

The significant question in this chapter is in what direction(s) such conceptual and contextual transformations can be identified as reflected in contemporary literary texts. The question already presents a conundrum: what kind of literary surveys can be taken up at this stage to address such a question? The

answer is – retaining some fairness – to look at certain significant literary trends and transformations and explore a few select examples from the corpus of late-twentieth century or early-twenty-first century writers in both Bengali and Urdu. A recurring theme in several contemporary texts is the profound consciousness of the absence of otium as a function of the self. This absence is closely linked to socio-economic exclusion and various discriminatory practices. This conscious self is mainly embodied by the protagonist or characters in a novel, novella, or story, except, in some instances, the blurring of identities – as writer and character – is seen to occur, where the consciousness of otium’s absence is expressed more directly. My observation extends to the understanding that in these texts, the quest of otium, or grieving its loss or absence, is projected in a spatiotemporal and functional setting that is often beyond the constraints of the purely human-physical world. The question of self is often projected onto the “other”, where the other embodies the uncanny, supernatural, and the non-human. What kind of world(s) are formulated in this scenario where the focus of the self is rendered fissured? The depicted setting, in many of these texts, is a world inhabited by humans and non-humans, i.e., ghosts, vampire-like beings, spectres, animals, and natural environment as forms of consciousness, questioning the very idea of the self in its manifestations of the unsayable, the unknown, and the impossible. In these assertions of the self, the absence of otium is also signalled in the incommensurability of language to express the self, reasserting the urgent need to turn to emotions and temporalities.

These narratives of the uncanny are based on a starkly realistic depiction of contemporary society, addressing comprehensive questions of the self and subjectivity, especially in forms of exclusion, through a juxtaposition of real with spectral and social with surreal. In a sense, these narratives ask the question of otium that resonates, at least in idea, with Hartmut Rosa’s concept of ‘resonance’ – i.e., *our relationship to the world* (2019). This proposed understanding of resonance in the examples I read is inherently linked with the question of what it means to be a human, and the question is asked, recurrently, by decentring the human as not the only, but as merely one of the inhabitants of the narrated world. This chapter argues that such assertions of ‘non-human’ consciousness are strategised to address, critique, and express emotions at the restrictions of a privileged, unfair, and exclusive notion of otium in a discriminatory society inclined towards material greed and “selfishness” (Jaffrelot & Van der Veer 2008: 18). My reading understands the shift in socio-economic values and their impact on the possibilities of otium as central to these literary reflections. It must be clarified that this selection is still minimal and microscopic in volume, meant to provoke a specific reading of otium in late twentieth/early twenty-first-century literature with its focus on the aspect of exclusion, which, as this book has argued, is as significant characteristic of otium as acceleration.

To explore these transformations as reflected in literature in a possibly systematic manner, the genres selected vary from short narratives, stories (short and long), essays and novels in both Bangla and Urdu. A selection of such loose-genre writings by Intizar Husain (writings from the 1970s – 2001) and a long story by Khalid Jawed, entitled “*Tafriḥ kī Ek Dopahar*” (An afternoon of idle wandering, 2008 a) as read as significant contemporary texts in Urdu. For Bengali, the texts selected are Bani Basu’s 1993 novel *Gāndharbī*³⁵⁷, and Nabarun Bhattacharya’s famed novel *Hār’bārṭ* (*Herbert*, 1993), along with a selection of his short stories based on the fictionalised flying humans, *Phyātāru* (written in the early 2000s). Perhaps a brief note about the selection of authors is in place. While Jawed, Basu, and Bhattacharya are identified as ‘Indian’ authors writing in Urdu and Bengali, Husain is hailed as one of the most significant Pakistani writers of the twentieth century. Having migrated to Pakistan from India during the 1947 partitioning of the subcontinent, he often returned to India and claimed an identity rooted in the heritage of the subcontinent beyond nationalist categories. Selecting Husain as an author in this chapter is motivated by this understanding of a more significant subcontinental identity on the one hand; he also brings a contrast to the other authors, whose fictional settings are located in contemporary India. Simultaneously, the selection of Husain’s texts demonstrates a transnational understanding of his narratives. On the other hand, I have refrained from focusing on narratives located in socio-cultural concerns of contemporary Pakistan, where possible. This caution, as has already been mentioned, is owing to a respect for the tradition of otium in Urdu literature in Pakistan, which I believe is slightly different than in the Indian context and needs closer attention than is permissible within the present scope. Moreover, because this chapter takes the rise of the neoliberal economy in India as an essential junction, I have been careful not to conflate it with concerns that may be relevant to the Urdu tradition in Pakistan. At the same time, Husain’s writings also question and defy these nationalist fault lines and make a strong case for decentring national identity, so intricately tied to formulations of exclusion in the present times. Intizar Husain (1925–2016) is known for traversing genres, styles, and national associations/community identities; all these strategies were directed towards a sense of ‘subcontinental syncretism’. His enormous oeuvre of writings, overlapping genre definitions like stories, fiction, even non-fiction and reportage, and literary essays, among others, are often overlooked compared to his novels. In this chapter, I tap into a selection of such

³⁵⁷ *Gāndharbī* is a feminine reference coined by Basu for the skilled musician-protagonist of her novel. It refers to the class/group of mythical celestial skilled musicians, the Gandharvas (usually masculine) in Hindu mythology.

writings that contribute to the literary ‘world’ of Intizar Husain, where questions of otium, in my opinion, remain central to his ideas of literature. These questions attain expressions in narratives surrounding memory and haunting, alienation and exile, human and environment, and repeatedly, in the interweaving of living and storytelling. Husain’s works present an exciting corpus for research on otium in South Asian literary contexts and towards reading otium beyond the limits of social constructs to signal the entanglement of the human with nature, environment, and the mythological.

Like Husain, Nabarun Bhattacharya (1948–2014), an extremely significant Bengali writer of recent times, is widely read, owing to several translations of his phenomenal novel, *Hār'bārt*. The poverty-ridden protagonist of the novel, Harbart Sarkar, communicates with the dead (as he believes), as urban Calcutta of the 70s and 80s is transformed with the haunting memory of the Naxalite insurgency and police brutalities. While *Hār'bārt* was radical in its context, located in the vortex of socio-political transformations, Bhattacharya’s later writings, notably his *Phyātāru* series (of short stories), present a scathing critique of social and economic corruption, especially class-based discriminations in the ‘India shining’ context of political void. Bhattacharya’s fiction is highly critical, arguably owing to his politics, and lends non-human consciousness as agents and voices of critique. His texts condemn human greed and selfishness bred in unjust societies. I read otium as a critical tool in his texts, where the absence of otium’s possibilities for his protagonists manifest social discriminations on various levels, fuelled by class (also caste and gender) inequalities.

Bani Basu’s (1939–) fiction addresses an incomparable versatility in the context of contemporary Bengali fiction. While her texts often address the struggles of women in the social context of contemporary West Bengal, her oeuvre is much more extensive. She is perhaps most famous for her magnum opus, *Maitreya Jātaka* (1996), set in the chronotope of Buddha’s life. I chose to read the novel *Gāndharbī* from her collection owing to the text’s treatment of the possibility and the absence of otium in the late twentieth-century context of Calcutta, especially for a woman in her constrained social structure. Not only does the novel allow us to reflect upon the gendered aspects of otium in this context, but it also reveals the evanescent and transcendental, as well as immersive nature of such an emotional experience. Otium, in this case, is explored through the character’s ontological aestheticisation in musical compositions, rehearsals, and execution, where art (music) is deeply interwoven into the physicality and the sensorial aspects of the character. These experiences – compared to the other-worldly, fictitious nature of *gāndharbas* (celestial singers from mythology) – are presented in conflict with the socio-normative gender roles set around the protagonist’s grim narrative reality. The novel explores otium in crisis while addressing its dimension of art in a conflicted world.

Khalid Jawed (1960–), a contemporary Urdu novelist and literary critic, is well-known for his novels *Maut kī Kitāb* (The Book of Death, 2011) and *Ni‘mat-Khāna* (The Paradise of Food, 2014). Two collections of stories titled *Ākhrī Da‘vat* (The last invitation, 2007) and *Tafriḥ kī Ek Dopahar* (2008) constitute his earlier works. Jawed’s fiction is known for addressing existential philosophy in a contextualised contemporary South Asian/Indian setting. I chose to read his long story (or alternately, novella), “*Tafriḥ kī Ek Dopahar*”, which directly addresses the topic of idle wandering and indulges in a kind of Benjaminian, investigative *flânerie*, but that is also Derridean in its spectrality. Concerning idleness and hauntology, the story pushes our understanding of otium and freedom beyond the limits of living in the physical human world. Is this ‘idle wandering’/*tafriḥ* then actually idle and aimless, or is it, in fact, in quest of idleness itself? How are these attitudes and relations to otium expressed in emotions in these texts? What roles do feelings have in these narratives with respect to otium, haunting, and resonance? A common theme in these recent texts is the overlap in the absence of otium experiences on the one hand, particularly as enjoyable, as the freedom to act (or not) as one will; and on the other hand, the use of intradiegetic otium related (in)activities – like immersion in music, or idle wandering, wasting time, recalling memories, or indulging in scenes of *āḍḍā* and verbal socialising – as subversive forms of otium, used as a critical-conceptual tool. Before delving into the texts, I discuss a point of departure in reading otium vis-a-vis hauntology.

6.1.1 Hauntology, Discrimination, and Subjectivity: Towards a Departure in Reading Otium

Discussions on the convergence of topics like haunting, time, and capitalism are hardly new to academic explorations since they were impressively brought together in Jacques Derrida’s concept of ‘hauntology’ (Frn. *hantologie*), initiating the so-termed ‘spectral turn’ (*Spectres de Marx*, 1993). The concept of hauntology was coined from the constitutive elements of haunting and ontology (for him, to be is to be haunted). Concretely, it developed from the idea that the legacy of Marx’s thought or ideology continues (and will continue) to haunt Western society and thought – as a recurring, returning question, as “*revenant*”.³⁵⁸ The theory was proposed in response to the looming question of ‘whither

³⁵⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (1994), 4. “The revenant is going to come”; the pun on the French – *revenir* – is typical.

Marxism?’³⁵⁹ and Francis Fukuyama’s famous claim of “the end of history” with the collapse of communist governments across maps, the rise of free-market economies on a global scale and the following “malign” as well as “benign” transformations.³⁶⁰ However, Derrida’s formulations of deconstructing Marxism and retaining faithfulness to “a certain spirit of Marxism, to at least one of its spirits” (1994: 75) have been severely critiqued.³⁶¹ Inspired by the first line of *The Communist Manifesto*³⁶² – “A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism” (Marx & Engels 1969 [1848]: 14) Derrida draws on the plurality and the repetition of this spectrality in his title. His concept of hauntology, to explicate the rather obvious, is not regarding belief in ghosts and spectres, but instead to argue “beyond the opposition between presence and non-presence, actuality and inactuality, life and non-life, of thinking the possibility of the specter, the specter as possibility” (Derrida 1994: 13). As an analytical tool, it opens ways of theorising and reading multiply and uncertainly, acknowledging the dilemma of a future that will not be but will also not be extinguished, and a certain acceptance towards ideas of trans-temporality. This openness to uncertainty and fluidity in conceptualisations of temporality has brought hauntology to the proverbial academic table. Moreover, Derrida’s (and others after him) preference for the use of the lexicon ‘spectres’ (the original German in Marx and Engels’ manifesto (1848) being “*Gespenst*” – which also translates to an apparition, a phantom or a ghost) has had a significant role in this transformation. This has been aptly summarised by editors of *The Spectralities Reader*, María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren: “Specter” and “spectrality” do not only have a more serious, even “scholarly ring to them, but specifically evoke an etymological link to visibility and vision, to that which is both *looked at* (as fascinating spectacle) and *looking* (in the sense of examining), suggesting their suitability for exploring and illuminating phenomena other than the putative return of the dead (2013: 1–2).

³⁵⁹ Reference to the conference title – “Whither Marxism? Global Crises in International Perspective” held at the University of California in 1993, at which Derrida was invited to confer the plenary address, the lecture that emerged into his famous book.

³⁶⁰ Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg, Editor’s Introduction, *Spectres of Marx*, viii.

³⁶¹ See essays by Antonio Negri, Terry Eagleton, Aijaz Ahmad and others in *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s Spectres of Marx*. Ed. Michael Sprinker (1999).

³⁶² Sourced from Marx and Engels, *Selected Works, Vol. One*. (1969). <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Manifesto.pdf> accessed on 12th November 2021.

Spectrality or, ghosts or the return of the dead are still often perceived as taboo, in many ways, within scientific/humanities studies. Research and knowledge traditions, particularly in modern Europe, have attempted to banish the ghost from all talks seriously academic. The growth of scientific knowledge, inventions like photography and X-Ray, and later the fascination with forensics and DNA, in many ways, enhanced and heightened the arguments towards scientific rationalism and evidence-based knowledge, as we have seen in [Chapter 5](#). And yet, the uncontainable fascination and interest in the subject, particularly in literature from the late eighteenth to the early-nineteenth century, in the fantastic and Gothic elements, but also in specific *orientalist* versions of Romanticism (popularised by poems like Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* [1816]), have always kept the supernatural deeply associated with literary engagement. Tabish Khair has drawn attention to the proliferation of Gothic literature in English with its deep roots in the centre-periphery nexus owing to the colonial enterprise for Englishmen/Europeans (2009: 8–9). Simultaneously, the boom in psychoanalysis and scientific studies of maladies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was seriously invested in exorcising the ghost from social discourses in Europe. Nonetheless, deep interest and investment in the unknown within the self can be witnessed in the rise of organisations like the Society for Psychical Research (founded in 1882) and the British National Association of Spiritualists (1873), among others. In South Asia, too, the import and intensification of European scientific knowledge through colonialism and reform led to a rigorous purge of societal superstitions (or rigorous attempts were made, to say the least). The occult, the uncanny, and the supernatural have long been present within South Asian literary traditions. For example, the pre-novel Urdu genre of the *dāstān* or the *qiṣṣā*, like the *Dāstān-i Amīr Hamzā* and *Qiṣṣa-i Cahār Darveś* (among others), foreground the relations between humans and non-humans like *jins*, fairies, and supernatural tricksters and characters. Also, the world of the non-humans – gods/goddesses (in the shape of super-humans, animals or morphed beings that are both), mythical creatures, animals, plants and forests – have had a prolonged bearing in South Asian knowledge traditions that are recreated over time.³⁶³ The tradition, diversity, and plurality of ghostly apparitions in the subcontinental oral literature, folklore, and myths also present a *problématique* for linking the occult specifically with the colonial and the postcolonial.³⁶⁴ Most subcontinental narratives of uncanny, where humans and non-humans interact, do not necessarily share a

³⁶³ For example, the medieval genre of tales/poems of benediction (*Maṅgal/kābya*) like *Manasāmaṅgal* and its several renditions through the centuries.

³⁶⁴ See Katarzyna Ancuta, “Asian Gothic”, *Modern Gothic* (2014), 208–9.

genealogy with what are considered 'ghosts' in the modern sense. The genealogy of ghosts and supernatural entities in South Asian literary traditions is deeply entangled with religion, nature or natural terrain, social beliefs, spirituality, myths and legends and must be a work of immense scope and scale.³⁶⁵ Not only do manifestations of ghosts and phantoms and super-human/supernatural entities vary within geographic-cultural regions, religious-spiritual thought, and literary and linguistic traditions, but they also often have knotty origins with influences from spaces that could be as varied as Persia, Arabia, purgatory or the bottom of the ocean.

Although not expounding upon the genealogy of the uncanny in South Asia, the attempt here addresses the remarkable recurrence of narratives regarding otium with supernatural agency and existence in contemporary, late-twentieth-century literature. This recurrence is a manifestation of an uncomfortable, unhappy, and insurgent response to the triumph of capitalism and the resultant drastic transformations in society. These transformations left an unsettling impact on ideas of the self and subjecthood as class divisions became unbridgeable in an unprecedented manner. While these contemporary representations of ghosts or supernatural beings tend to be closer to more widely recognised modern/Western modes of (non)being, they often defy distinctions between the phantom, the fairy, and the ghost. The origins of these gothic elements are as chaotic as their (in)abilities, and for our purpose, they can be noted as functioning in three ways. First, they offer themselves as analytical tools in keeping with the theories of spectrality. Secondly, and closely related to the first, they lend themselves to an exploration of the emotion of being haunted and haunting. And finally, they provide as agents of resistance, even insurgence, against the human-centric formulation of the world in activities of progress and development, rampant industrialisation, and eradication of forests, leading to unequal societies based on capitalist forces. Their positioning against all efficiency and utility relevant to 'smart' societies is a subversive form of otium. At the same time, the emotion they provoke – being haunted – emerges as a dissonant, asynchronous, and reflective manifestation of mourning the absence of otium. In these texts, haunting expresses a requiem for otium that deals with and delves into spectrality, aesthetics, idleness, and uselessness. The motif of haunting facilitates contemplating and critiquing the abrupt and unjust collapse of emotions (how time was felt) and temporalities (the relations between the past, the present, and the future). Through the experience of haunting, the requiem for otium, literary narratives, as analysed below, enable

³⁶⁵ See, for example, the recent publication *Ghosts, Monsters and Demons of India*, Eds. J. Furcifer Bhairav & Rakesh Khanna (2020).

a space for repose and rest against “the experience of modernization”, which also emerged in the last few decades as the “experience of acceleration” (Rosa 2013: 21). Haunting, ghostly presences, and the ‘gothic’ then needs to be read in a “semiotic turn” beyond the logic of language, as a “process of signification” (Ancuta and Valančiūnas 2021: 4).

6.1.2 Otium, Temporalities, and Emotions in South Asia

Otium is often manifested in emotions of loss and absence. Through these emotional manifestations, otium is presented as a reflection upon lost times, lost homes, and lost beloveds/objects of love, enabling emotional experiences while dwelling in the memory of loss and attachment. While nostalgia and melancholia are both emotional responses to loss or ‘unfinished business’, haunting demarcates itself to be different in its *persistence* of that which has faced death or a kind of unnatural and unjust extinction. In haunting, a certain kind of temporal transcendence takes place, where it is not just the past that is still left as undealt, but also the mourning of a future that could have been but will not be – a future of the past that interferes with the present – the (im)possible future’s past. While nostalgia accepts a severed past and its presence in the present, and melancholy does not accept the past in the form of loss, haunting persists in the future, as not present but also not absent. In fact, as Derrida claims, mourning is work itself, “the trait by means of which one ought perhaps to reconsider the very concept of production” (1994: 121). Mourning follows trauma to be processed, enabling one to move through work, through effort, towards production. Haunting, or unfinished trauma, is the absence of the work of mourning and dwelling in the memory of trauma. While this may also be a feature of melancholy, haunting differs from melancholy in its awareness of loss; it addresses both trauma (in its unjust past) as well as a certain kind of utopia (in its imagination of and hunger for a future that cannot/will not come to pass). Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock aptly sees the late 1980s as “the beginning of heightened interest in ghosts and hauntings in cultural and literary criticism” (2013: 62). He links this ‘spectral turn’ towards the end of the millennium to the “recent preoccupation with ‘trauma’ in which the presence of a symptom demonstrates the subject’s failure to internalize a past event, in which something from the past emerges to disrupt the present” (Weinstock 2013: 63). While trauma and haunting are necessarily interwoven, haunting’s agency in the future allows it further analytical possibilities that can be applied to the present. It is obvious and has been expressed fairly often that injustice, discrimination, and abuse, often on the basis of racist, sexist and capitalist subjugation, are seen to re-emerge in the return of the ghost who was denied a

present and a past. This strain of hauntology, also in many ways the crux of Derrida's reading of Marx's spectres on class struggle, is central to our context of otium (or its absence) in contemporary South Asia.

Haunting, spectrality, and ghosts can also entail different meanings in terms of temporality and trauma in the context of South Asian literary-narrative traditions. Ghosts from the past often inhabit the present and the future as cohabitants, as memories and as companions in several literary contexts. Although history is acknowledged in its linearity, at the same time, these subjectivities are often located within conflicting traditions of multiple temporalities – both a cyclical understanding of time (reincarnation, rebirth) as well as with ideas of a *telos*, a fate/destiny and that the past had already decided the future. The boundaries between the past, the present and the future are often understood to be more fluid in these traditions. Arguing for a renewed reflection on “temporal relations”, i.e., the relations between the past, the present and the future, Margrit Pernau (2021 a) has raised the question of a possible synchronicity between them:

What if the present, the past, and the future already existed in synchronicity, and the work of modern subjects was directed to establishing their difference and guarding the boundaries between them, preventing the past and the future from spilling over into the present? What if it was not asynchronicity that was the given, the natural state to be overcome by synchronization (Jordheim, 2017), but the overcoming of a synchronicity, which could no longer be accommodated in linear thinking? (Pernau 2021 a: 8)

In this light, the presence of ghosts from the past and the future can allow for a re-synchronisation of anachronistic feelings towards time, now felt ‘out of joint’. For Pernau, such a re-synchronisation is possibly felt through the concept of ‘resonance’ – the recognition and acknowledgement of which she identifies as “a strong emotional experience, an experience of community” (2021 a: 9). Can such an emotional experience address the disintegration of community in the dystopic context of contemporary South Asian fiction? Can resonance and haunting correlate to address the emotional crisis regarding the absence of otium?

Reading the blurring of borders between the dead and the undead, the past and the present in Nabarun Bhattacharya's novel *Hār'barī* (1993), among other examples, Hans Harder identifies such fluidity as ‘magic realism’ or “*jādubāstab*” in Bengali (2018 a: 947). Tracing the development (and sometimes decline) of such a style in modern South Asian literary contexts – in Bengali, Urdu, and Hindi – he identifies recent criticism of magic realism or supernatural literature as divided between the so-called spiritual east/global south and material west/global north in contemporary scholarship. Instead, Harder argues that literary

styles or patterns such as ‘magic realism’ cannot be confined to the narrow compartmentalisation of literature and that much of European literature continues to remain *haunted* (Harder 2018 a: 954).³⁶⁶ In agreement with Harder, one may still argue that while magic realism, the supernatural, or haunting are indeed literary traits that have more global resonance and are shared than regionally exclusive, how they function can be observed to differ. In other words, how haunting is conceptualised may be represented differently in regionally demarcated literatures, which may (or may not) be linked to their religious-spiritual, emotional-temporal and linguistic-literary traditions. In the link between temporalities and emotions – “the relations between the past, the present, and the future as imagined and experienced by the actors”, (Pernau 2021 a: 3) Pernau likewise argues for the need to read these emotions at the core of temporalities “from a global perspective” (2021 a: 4). While such emotions do not necessarily mean and feel the same, they can still be identified through certain resonating, universal “tropes” (ibid.).

6.1.3 The Sensory Semantics of Otium and Haunting

Considering these cross-cultural or global aspects of emotions and literary traits vis-à-vis temporalities, I propose a deep connection of otium with haunting through a literary analysis of contemporary texts in Bengali and Urdu that this chapter reads. Elsewhere, I have suggested in contexts of asymmetrical power nexus between communities, where formulations of otium are under ‘taboo’, a study of the affective and sensory semantics of otium through reading “resistance expressed by or projected onto the body” can help us unpack the linguistic and semantic asymmetries in such ambivalent concepts (Noor 2021: 307). My proposal, therefore, is not only supported by the literary-conceptual analyses that follow but also through a reading of the semantic networks surrounding haunting and otiose activities or forms of mobility in these languages that signal the affective beyond the descriptive in language, like ‘*bhaṭaknā*’ in Hindi/Urdu and ‘*ghāre cāpā*’ in Bengali, among others. Cutting through these semantic nets and expressions, haunting is to be read, *inter alia*, as inhabiting a threshold emotional experience with regards to otium – it expresses an impossible desire for it while it also allows, in the absence of the work of mourning, a persistent dwelling in the hung present, formulating a mood of release and rest

³⁶⁶ Emphasis mine. I translate Harder’s Bengali phrase, “*ghāre bhūt cāpā*”, directly as ‘haunted’. The Bengali original entails the perching of a ghost on one’s shoulders – which can adequately be translated as ‘haunted’ or ‘possessed’.

constitutive of otium. Paradoxically, this immobility and rest is also a form of restlessness, an inability to achieve resolution, facilitating a temporal fluidity.

Haunting is perpetual and eternal wandering. While ‘*bhaṭaknā*’ is the word in Hindi and Urdu usually used to describe haunting (*bhaṭaktī ātmā*/haunting soul), the word actually connotes this restless, idle wandering. These registers of aimlessness are not necessarily associated with haunting but entangled in the semantic networks with lexemes associated with idleness like *āvārah ghūmnā/āvāragardī*, aimless wandering, deviating from a course or route, with its origins in dislocation (discussed in Chapter 4). *Bhāsā*, or floating, signalling a lucid fluidity, enabling transgression, is also often used to refer to the movement of ghosts in defiance of gravitational forces; in Basu’s novel, the allusion to transgression is expressed in this lexeme to refer to both the movement of a *rāga*, as well as of the singer’s consciousness, into the celestial realm. Likewise, *urē berāno* or flying about, parses mobility signalling resistance and transgression in Bhattacharya’s stories. *Ghāre cāpā* – literally, perched on someone’s shoulders is associated with taking possession of someone; it is also a phrase often used in collocation with ghosts, *jins*, *vetālas*, and spirits to imply possession. Ghosts are, therefore, represented as perched on or latched onto someone and as rambling and wandering, drifting, flying and floating; these formulations of transgressive mobility are closely associated with haunting. In the texts analysed later, these manifestations of resistive or deviational mobility are often depicted in contrast to the speed of accelerated capitalist society. This reading of the sensory semantics of haunting enables us to perceive ghosts as allowing for a specific temporal synchronicity and a pace that allows one the opportunity to be, to experience emotions, and to feel – arguably, only after release from the business of living (in an unfair world). The commonly intelligible word for ghosts in South Asia – *bhūt* – is itself a synonym for the past or occurrences, while the Sanskrit word *bhūta*, literally the perfect participle of *bhū*, “to be, to become”, i.e. “been”, refers to meanings of both senses – the past/“gone” as well as “being”, and “become”.³⁶⁷ Tracing these semantic networks and reading expressions of haunting as an analytical tool to protest against the discriminatory depiction of societies, I argue that recent literature in the vernaculars presents haunting and being haunted as an emotional manifestation of otium (or its absence).

In the following sections, I read haunting as a requiem for such possibilities of otium by shifting the focus to the marginal. The literary discourses on

³⁶⁷ Monier Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary, 1899, printed edition, 761. <https://www.sanskrit-lexicon.uni-koeln.de/scans/csl-apidev/servepdf.php?dict=mw&page=0760> accessed on 17th May 2022.

otium that this study has focused on are largely mainstream and of 'elite' stature: the socio-literary context has been the nineteenth-century Urdu intelligentsia and elite sections of cosmopolitan Muslim society in India, idylls in nature for Tagore, and the cultural-intellectual negotiations of the declining Hindu *bhadralok* of post-colonial, urban Calcutta. The marginalised idle – the *āvārah* of Manto's colonial Bombay is the only figure that allowed us to understand how otium is addressed and manifests itself in the context of the non-elite, the masses at the peripheries. This chapter will revisit the periphery to contextualise otium in a highly unequal society shaped by capitalism, rampant industrialisation, and depletion of natural, harmonious spaces. An underlying commonality in the selected texts is a sharp critique of the contemporary social (dis)order in the subcontinent, with oppression and subjugation in divergent sections of society.

Portrayal of contemporary society in these texts is discriminatory, even dystopian, and otium – for the marginalised, fissured, unfree self – represents a vision of utopia, a future that was not allowed to unfurl. Haunted by the obliteration of that possible future and the anachronistic present, these voices depict haunting as a subverted manifestation of what could have been experiences and emotions of otium, artistic creativity, restful leisure, and idle freedom. Such emotional experiences, in turn, become activities and encounters experienced only by those characters who *transcend* their restrictive societal context. This transcendence can range from an intense, surreal, immersive experience with music to the sudden, almost post-human ability to sprout wings by an oppressed population in the act of subversive criticism of political society. What emerges is the deep connection of social reality with haunting, contemplation, and otium, as so aptly explicated by Avery Gordon:

Haunting is a constituent element of modern social life. It is neither premodern superstition nor individual psychosis; it is a generalizable social phenomenon of great import. To study social life one must confront the ghostly aspects of it. This confrontation requires (or produces) a fundamental change in the way we know and make knowledge, in our mode of production. (Gordon 1997: 7)

This mode of production of knowing and reading through ghostly presences has a long tradition in the subcontinent's cultural-literary spheres. It draws from the traditional, sometimes spiritual aspects of discourse. The texts read here are directed towards a critique of accelerated and exclusionary social life, making a case for the urgent need for otium, idleness, and leisurely states of being to fulfil the self and subjectivity. A common practice of otium prevalent in South Asia is the telling, the oral rendition, of ghost stories or occult narratives in gatherings; against the backdrop of alienation and acceleration, these

communitarian literary impulses take recourse to forms of narrating the occult, to not only mourn the absence of such experiences, but also use the ghostly to read, confront, and critique social reality. In the following discussions, I identify two seemingly contradictory ways of reading otium – as aimless and as a quest. As already discussed, this contradiction lends to the inherent ambivalence in otium. The concept is neither bound by a productive goal nor conceptualised as absolute abandonment. This chapter explores this paradoxical nature of otium in an alternate context, in relation to the uncanny other, within a spatiotemporal axis beyond the constraints of the strictly physical, homocentric universe. How are emotions projected in this setting, and what roles do emotions have in constructing such a setting? Arguing that narration itself is inherently linked with the feeling and expression of emotions, let us turn to the correlation between haunting, otium, and narration.

6.2 Idle Poets, Narrating Ghosts, and Vagabond Stories: The Writings of Intizar Husain

Hailing from the town of Dibai in Uttar Pradesh and having lived most of his life in Pakistan, Intizar Husain (1925–2016) identified as someone whose heritage belongs to the larger subcontinent and its history (memories of his hometown in India are ubiquitous in his works). In Pakistan, he is often accused as a Hindu-/Indian sympathiser and criticised for writing within Buddhist and Hindu traditions, following the *Jātaka* tales, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. He located himself within what he calls the ‘enmeshed’ culture of the subcontinent, “in exile”, wandering between “Ayodhya and Karbala”, representing the two emotional spatialities of the Indic and the Islamicate traditions of the subcontinent.³⁶⁸ In this section, I read the significance and function of otium in Husain’s ‘loose’ genres of writing, where story, memory, essay, and criticism merge in styles of storytelling. In Husain’s works, story, i.e., *kahānī* or *afsānah*, is considered the most significant element for humans to live in a fulfilling way. Reflections, reportage, and fiction overlap even within and in between stories. In these instances, the narratives attain a texture of orality, executed in forms of remembering, retelling, and conversational, alternately drawn from subcontinental storytelling traditions. Characters, places, and events from various narratives return and persist in other narratives, and these recurrences defy the logic of continuity, taking recourse to a technique that uses the *revenant* as method. In the final outcome, narrative – as story – is the most significant space for reso-

368 Alok Bhalla, “Introduction”, *Story is a Vagabond* (2016), x.

nance to echo in an otherwise indifferent world. Husain sees stories as ghosts, wandering and idle, free and dislocated, as vagabonds, and assigns them an agency beyond the human aspirations of discipline and regulation.

Intizar Husain's narratives reflect a fluidity in temporalities, where the past, present, and future flow seamlessly. Many of his works dealing with the past have been read as nostalgic; however, I would argue that the sense of longing he expresses is not for a definitive imagination of a historical past but rather for a world where humans are aware of their sense of responsibility with relation to the world they inhabit. Such a world is inadvertently imagined as located in the pre-modern past. Admittedly, his fictional world is obsessed with the past, but this obsession is far from being portrayed as 'hankering after the good old times'. The past he envisions is akin to a literary understanding of deep time, often claiming its inheritance to pasts as far as *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, of Buddha, and Hasan and Husain. Not only is his conception of the past enormous, but in his works, the past haunts the present and the future. This past is, in the words of Muhammad Umar Memon, "the provenance and determinant of the present and the future" (Memon 1981: 73). We can observe two ways in which the past is depicted in Husain's works. Certain aspects of the past are presented as simpler times, and this depiction of the past is often contrasted with the recent industrial developments, nuclear threats, and accelerated society based on speed and competition that lead to dissonance and alienation. In this aspect, the depiction of the past approaches a nostalgic, even romanticised appreciation of history. The past is able to heal humans through its retelling, where stories embody the history of humans in relation to other cohabitants of the earth. In the latter function, the past does not remain 'of the past' anymore but flows into the future, embodied in the emotion of a persistent, impossible hope.

Typically, Husain's narratives are firmly rooted within several storytelling traditions of the subcontinent, as demonstrated by his wide range of styles. Entangled with myths, legends and folk tales, literature, for him, is intricately tied to the identity of 'story' – in Urdu/Hindi, *kahānī*, which is fluid and foot-loose, unbound by structural constraints.³⁶⁹ Stories are seen as untameable, trans-temporal and beyond imposed categorisation.³⁷⁰ The unstructured, wild

369 Husain seamlessly uses both words – *kahānī* and *afsānah/afsāna*. While *afsānah* is written as such, and I have remained consistent in this transliteration, Husain often writes it as *afs ānā* in his titles.

370 Alok Bhalla, Intizar Husain, "In Conversation with Intizar Husain: Some Remembered, Some Imagined", *Story is a Vagabond* (2016). See also, for example, the short story "*Śaharzād ke Nām*", translated as "The Death of Schehrzaad".

and wandering power of stories, for Husain, allows humans to heal, make sense of their worlds, and enables them to feel and respect their relationships to the human and the non-human world, urging for a certain kind of peace, or *śāntī* in Urdu. These strong emotions associated with the power of stories are comparable to Rosa's sociological discourse of 'resonance' (*Resonanz*) when he writes: "love, respect and esteem ... our axes of resonance" (2019: 9). They have, perhaps, also a close affinity with what Pernau refers to as the strong emotional bonds within a community. For Husain, the concepts of literature and emotions are also based within the community. However, his understanding of the community is also more comprehensive than that of linguistic, print, or religious communities. For him, the community ranges from the ancient and traditional, handed down from generation to generation, thereby constructing the concept of a community based on acknowledgement, affinity, and feelings. His literary community then includes his ancestors, myths from the subcontinent, and Chekhov and Maupassant.

Husain's fictional world – often flowing into his factual, immediate world – is arguably broader than the subcontinent's traditions, embodying a "complex and pluralistic wholeness".³⁷¹ His literary conceptions provoke the question, 'What does it mean to be human on this Earth?' Husain's writings question the relationship humans forge with their landscapes, fellow humans and non-human cohabitants of the planet, pre-empting what is now identified as the 'Anthropocene' in literary studies. In Husain's narratives, these questions are embodied in representations of spectrality. The ghost in his fictional world is the necessary ghost, the fluid past; it is the friend and the neighbour who cohabits the planet. The ghost is also often associated with nature as the consciousness that led humans to fashion stories and literature. In a Derridean understanding of hauntology, the ghost in Husain's narratives enables the acceptance of the uncertain, the unknown, and the other, in contrast to a purely human-centric world. In his essay "Bikram, Betāl aur Afsāna" (King Vikram, Betal, and Story)³⁷², Husain criticises modern, accelerated society in terms of emotional dissonance:

371 Charles Taylor, quoted in Alok Bhalla, 2016 a, vii.

372 In the English anthology of Husain's translated works, translators and editors Alok Bhalla and Frances Pritchett loosely translate *betāl* as vampire; but this is a problematic translation, perhaps inspired by Richard Burton, who famously translated/trans-created the Sanskrit original, *Vetālapañcaviṃśati* (Twenty-five tales of Vetāl) as *Vikram and the Vampire* (1893). However, a *vetāl* (Urd. *betāl*) is distinct and different from a vampire and is now usually written as *betaal* or *vetaala* or *vetal*. See entry "Vetal" in *Ghosts, Monsters, and Demons of India* (2020).

The fear a man knows in the forest is different from the fear he feels in the city. It is fear of the unknown. The fear of the unknown creates depth in a person's character. But now, the fear of the unknown has disappeared. Now, we are absorbed by the fear of the known: fear of war, civil unrest, language conflicts, fear of death in traffic accidents, fear of being attacked by criminals. These forms of fear are humiliating, and such deaths, terribly undignified! (Husain 1989a: 125)

Resisting the processes of modernisation and industrialisation, Hussain's stories about humans are admittedly based on the past. Memories of places and people in his adolescence, of their everyday leisurely chatter and verbal socialising around a sweetshop – Qayuma's shop – recur through his several writings. "Qayūma kī Dukān", a story that resurfaces in and haunts his other pieces like "Dā'irah" (Circle), dwells on the quotidian idleness and reflects the slow pace of life in small towns before the Partition riots. Idle, leisurely conversations are rendered narrative modes in his stories where one story leads to another, and parallel narratives emerge by the end of one story. His stories are haunted by memories of growing up in small towns of the subcontinent, in the shade of the banyan trees and empty ruins of old houses, of kites flown on the rooftop terraces, and afternoons spent listening to stories of ghosts and *jins* and hauntings. These stories merge with his literary journalism, essays, and criticism, resisting genres and formulating a world of its own, recognised by the people of the subcontinental north. These ways of life, the locations, the people, and the narratives he returns to are also recognised as the literary world of Intizar Husain. Stories and their ability of inducing a leisurely state of mind blend together in Husain's understanding of otium. As such, the topics of stories – the past and idleness – recur in his writings, enmeshed in each other.

In a part essay-part sketch entitled "Mādho, Oblomov aur Zāhid Ḍār" (Madhav, Oblomov and Zahid Dar, 1989b [1982]), Hussain traces the necessary idleness of Dar, a man of literature, a true poet, who resists the notion of doing literature and embodies literariness through living idly, sporadically, in drift. Dar lived a literary life of idleness, hanging out in coffee shops, reading books, and smoking cigarettes, identified as the last 'beat poet' of Lahore.³⁷³ His early youth was spent writing poetry, which was radical in its coarseness, simplicity, and emotional clarity. The poems were published under the pseudonym 'Mādho' or Madhav – one of the names of the Hindu god Vishnu, but more famously of his incarnation, Krishna. In several other sketches by Husain, Zahid Dar reappears again, like in "Fāltu Ādmi" or 'useless man' (1996) and "Pāk Ṭī Hā'us"

373 See Farah Zia, "The Dar side of Lahore", *The News on Sunday* <https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/796575-the-dar-side-of-lahore> accessed on 25th April 2021.

(2001). Dar's significance is, according to Husain, everlasting due to his idle existence, the narrative of living. "Mādho, Oblomov aur Zāhid Ḍār" begins with the past and its future: "For Maulana Hali's good information, he must be notified that despite his advice and warning, a useless Urdu poet has emerged, who only writes about women" (Husain 1989b: 221). Husain clearly expresses disdain towards ideas of 'purposeful' literature, as championed more than a century back by writers like Hali, who attempted to formulate the literary with utilitarian ethos. In contrast, the otiosity of Dar's poetry, philosophy, and lifestyle are commended as necessary for both literature and society to survive in meaningful ways.

Several essays are written in the form of stories, emerging from conversations, and they constitute the physical setting of Husain's writing as liminal, recurring spaces of idle dwelling and literary *āḍḍās/naśist*. These spaces haunt his literary world and re-emerge in their persistent resistance, refusing to be obliterated from memory. They resurface – sometimes as fictionalised versions of Qayuma's little sweetshop in Dibai, sometimes as the actual Pak Tea House before it was shut down in 1999, and sometimes as the legendary 'Rupnagar' (imaginary town). The extinction of such spaces, not only of quotidian, conversational, and intellectual experiences of otium but also of ruins of empty houses and idyllic small towns (*bastis* or *qasbas*), is a concern that recurs in the writings of Husain. In the essay titled "Pāk Ṭī Hāus: Cāy ke Mez se Fūṭpāth tak" (Pak Tea House: From the Tea Table to the Footpath, 2001), Husain laments the changing world outside the Tea House that knocked on its door and eventually forced the Tea House to shut down. It was replaced by a factory for manufacturing motor tyres. Recalling the last leisurely gathering with his friends at the Tea House, he writes:

"Perhaps this, today, is our last cup of tea here," I said.

"Rather like the Last Supper", added Masud Asha'ar.

At that time, a team from BBC had just arrived, equipped with cameras and whatnot. Perhaps Tea House was waiting for this hour all the while. It breathed its last in the glitter and glamour of BBC's cameras. And after that, there remained no light in the lamps. (Husain 2001: n.p.)

The crowd of the Tea House then moved on to the footpath and continued their itinerant gatherings. The memories and stories of Pak Tea House, Intizar Husain, Zahid Dar, young writers, and the literary group *Ḥalqah-i Arbāb-i Zauq* have now become inseparable from Lahore's urban myths and legends, haunted by the absence of those locations and days of leisurely literary gatherings. They reappear in discussions about and references to Husain, on his book covers and in the literary discussions in Pakistan's and India's Urdu circles. Through his repeated references to idleness, idle people, and places, Hussain brings the quo-

tidian and the anthropological dimensions of idleness to literature; at the same time, literature remains at the heart of idleness and leisure in his writings.

For Hussain, idleness and leisure are also philosophically associated with hope and resonance between humans, non-humans, and the world they inhabit. For this hope to be realised, the relation between stories and the past is argued to be of utmost significance. This interdependency is embodied in the fluid temporalities of Husain's narratives, like "*Mornāmah*" or "A Chronicle of the Peacocks". References to traditional grandiose genres (as titles for his short narratives), for instance, chronicles (*nāmah*), memoirs (*tazkirah*), and epic (*razmiya*) demonstrate the intentional temporal lapse and flexibility in his narrative discourse; they make for reflective, immersive, as well as critical reading. For example, in "*Mornāmah*", characters from the epic *Mahābhārata* flow into the narrator's memories of travelling in the city of Jaipur and his sighting of the beauty of peacocks. These memories of his recent trip to India lead him down the alley of childhood memories – of listening to his grandmother telling him the story of peacocks, birds exiled from paradise. These remembrances are shown as triggered by the news of an atomic explosion in Pokhran (in Rajasthan), due to which a pride of peafowls was terribly disturbed. Frightened, the birds flew up, crying loudly and scattering in different directions. For Husain, this was an unbearable instance of man's cruelty towards his cohabitants – animals and birds – who witness time's flow. Such cruelties formulate hindrance to the possibility of otium:

I had reached Shrivasthi late in the afternoon. Mahatma Buddha had lived there a long time ago. The vihara where he used to stay with his monks during the monsoons was now in ruins. Only a few scattered bricks mark its place. The peacock on the hill was, perhaps, the last of the survivors from the day of the Buddha, and still carried images of those days in his eyes. Because of the presence of that one peacock, Shrivasthi seemed a place of great tranquillity. (Husain 2016b: 160)

The peacock is identified as a bridge between the past and the present, having witnessed and remembered time through its passage. Peacocks, trees, and ghosts – inhabitants of Husain's literary world – have been silenced by the 'monologues' of humans and their barbaric concept of civilisation. Not only are they necessary for humans to understand the world, but they are also shown to be rightful cohabitants of the planet. Only through a deep understanding of and respectful relationship with them can humans heal and live a life of peace again. As he returns to his house in Pakistan across the border to write his 'chronicle' of the peacocks, he is haunted by the cursed character Ashwatthama/Aśvatthāmā of the *Mahābhārata*. Aśvatthāmā had wrongly killed the children of the Pandavas in the battle between the two clans and was cursed by

Krishna to wander alone in the forests for three thousand years. Such numbers – in years – turn to eternity, and past curses transform into metaphors and determinants for future impediments. The ghost that haunts Husain’s writing is that of footloose, wandering stories, and literary vagrancy engendering the experience he terms “*vāridāt*” (occurrence), which Husain and Memon translate as a “spiritual experience”.³⁷⁴ Connecting reality and its experience, Husain explicates the multiple layers of the concept:

To me, *vāridāt* has much more meaning. The external world possesses a type of reality for me, but I want to know what lies behind that reality, what are the sources of that reality. For me reality consists of layer after layer of truth. Let me give an example from my childhood. In talking about trees, I mentioned that I used to pick the fruit of tamarind trees and look longingly at the mangoes hanging on the trees. But behind these trees were the stories and legends I was told as a child. In a certain tree there lives a headless man whom I never did see. I heard from others that behind another tree there lives a ghost of a woman. Where was the headless man? Where was that ghost? Where was the genie who lives in a tree and who could catch you if you passed under it on a Thursday evening? (Husain in Memon 1983.)

The vagabond, wandering stories in Husain’s literary world are then in search of those layers of realities of being that enable humans to feel. As Bhalla sums it up, the “historians and dervishes, storytellers and epic poets, Bodhisattva and Sufi singers, peacocks and ghosts” in Husain’s writing are wandering the sorrowing earth in search of another gate – “the gates of peace” (Bhalla 2016b: 373–74). Although otium as peace and tranquillity remains abstract and unattainable in this dystopian and sorrowful depiction of the modern world, it can embody a possible experience, according to Husain’s narratives, in the resonance between humans and the non-humans who share the world. For this “alternative form of relating to the world” of resonating with the other, the narrative power of stories needs to be acknowledged and accepted as expressions of emotions, as a requiem.³⁷⁵ It is through stories that humans can resonate with themselves and with others on their journey, much like King Vikramaditya, who listened quietly to the stories narrated to him by the supernatural *betāl* in the legendary tale of *Betāl Pacīsī* (traced back to the 11th century). In

³⁷⁴ See Intizar Husain and M U Memon, “A Conversation Between Intizar Husain and Muhammad Umar Memon”. Trans. Bruce R. Pray (1983), 160–61.

³⁷⁵ Rosa mentions the extensively varied but identifiable ways of relating to the world in different cultures, where specific ways of relating are read as more responsive relation to each other. (2019) Chapter IV, section 3. “Cognitive Roadmaps and Cultural Worldviews”.

Husain's writings, otium emerges not only as an individual experience located within the self but as an experience that can be made possible through a relation of resonance between individuals and characters, i.e., in acknowledgement of others, the rights of others to cohabit and share the life-world of human beings, so that we can live in harmony, as feeling communities.

6.3 Immersion, Music, and Transcendence in Bani Basu's *Gāndharbī*

Moving away from the narrative to the sonorous and sensorial aspects of resonance, I now turn to the experience of immersion as otium. In Bani Basu's 1993 Bengali novel, *Gāndharbī*, otium is to be read as explored through artistic contemplation and immersion in music, within the constraints of a societal structure that is not conducive to creative freedom or leisurely pursuits for a young woman of little means. The social reality of bodily experiences is contrasted with the transcendental bodily experiences of an artisan, a mythical, and heavenly creature. The persistence of the artistic and the non-human haunts the social and societal constraints. The protagonist, Apala Mitra, hails from a lower-middle-class family in Calcutta in the early 1990s. Living with her mother and brother, Apala's story is narrated within the constrictions imposed on her by the family patriarch, the strict and conservative, elderly and widowed uncle/*jeṭhu*. Apala's devotion and dedication to her musical talents and her intense desire to pursue a life of music are thwarted by her uncle, who does not find such pursuits 'respectable' for their family's status; for him, music is, at best, a hobby that he has allowed her to take up since childhood. After her outstanding performance at a platform for talented young musicians, Apala is offered a scholarship and a chance to pursue a musical career by a great *ṭhumri* singer from Lucknow, Naznin Begam; however, *jeṭhu* warns Apala of such lures for he considers a profession in music to be the fate of courtesans and prostitutes (Basu 2014: 36).

The complexities of societal, gender, and class restrictions imposed on Apala in the story are finely contrasted with the contemplative voice of the narrative that allows us glimpses into Apala's emotional space as she experiences the sensuality of music. These clues to emotional interiority demonstrate immersive experiences of otium, aesthetics, and contemplation amid the very real hindrances to a fulfilling life, as the narrator describes, in Apala's voice, "*ārām, āśray, abasar ball'te kichu nei*"/there is no rest, no shelter, no leisure, (2014: 28). As Apala resists being succumbed into a joyless and mundane life abiding societal demands of respectability, it is her immersion in her music that allows her to feel the emotions of an artist, as a person beyond the claims of societal norms and proprieties:

It has been a while since it stopped raining. A moist breeze infused with the scent of jasmine wafts into the room on the rooftop. This is *dādā's* room.³⁷⁶ But Apu [Apala] often laid equal claims to the room. Presently, *dādā* is strolling along the rooftop, smoking cigarettes; this will continue for a while. That is how he enjoys his nocturnal distraction (*rāter bilās*). The smoke will disappear in the breeze on the rooftop, and *mā* and *jeṭhu* will not notice, or at least that is what he likes to think.

[...]

Resting her chin on one knee, Apala becomes oblivious to the room, the house, Kirti Mitra Lane. Her mind travels to Rabindra Sadan and its crowded hall. The lights in the auditorium are dimmed. A row of judges is seated at one end of the stage. Concealing part of her face behind the *tān'purā*, Apala sings; she goes on singing. Suddenly, she feels that a multitude of voices join her, singing to her tune. (Basu 2014: 15–16)

The narrative abounds with many such episodes where Apala immerses herself in the thought of music or in music itself. Music, song (*gān*), and melody (*sur*), as the above passage reflects, form a separate, parallel world that she inhabits; this world is presented in great contrast with the constrictions of her harsh social setting. These contrary worlds meet when the protagonist engages in her art and feels a transcendental experience of otium. Such transcendence is also observed by sympathetic characters, for instance, Apala's friend Soham, who remarks, "When she holds the *tān'purā*, Apala Mitra no longer remains in the world of mere mortals" (2014: 24).

While music, particularly within Indian traditions, has already been theorised as an aesthetic activity associated with otium in reading contemporary English novels from India³⁷⁷, emphasis has been laid on the association of music with memory and nostalgia rather than on reading the complementary relation between the aesthetic experience of immersion in music and the transcendental quality of otium. In this section, I explore this relation by reading Basu's novel. The association between the aesthetics of classical Indian music and experiences of otium rests in the culturally prevalent perception that classical music has deep roots in the other-worldly, higher realms beyond the mortal world. In Indic mythology, this realm is referred to as *gandharbalok* or the realm of the *gandharbas*. Much more than a questionable belief, such a perception is a culturally persistent emotional attitude towards creative forces and

³⁷⁶ *Dādā* is an affectionate address for an older brother. The omniscient narrator associates with Apala's voice and context by addressing her brother as *dādā*; the narrative is internally focalised. In the above context, it also addresses Apala in the affective Apu, as her brother would have.

³⁷⁷ See Fludernik, "Nostalgia for Otiose Leisure" (2020), 23. See Munz, "The Promise of Purposelessness" (2020) diss—chapter 3.

aesthetics, often claimed to be *felt* by music practitioners. The most widely used instances of such attitudes can be observed in suggestions that skilled and adequate singers and composers can use music and melody – if appropriately performed – to transform the weather. Such cultural myths are mainly popularised in the case of *rāga megh* and *malhār* (*rāgas* associated with clouds and rain), performed to call upon the clouds during monsoon.³⁷⁸ These myths, often a matter of devotion to art for practitioners, are generally ridiculed by laypeople; in the text, Apala’s brother accuses her instructor, *ostād’jī*³⁷⁹ as responsible for the sudden rain, teasingly suggesting that he must have sung an unparalleled form of *meghamallār* (2014: 14–15).

Apala’s music instructor/*ostād’jī*, explicates the notion of spirituality, aesthetics, and creative desires early in the novel, in the concept of *gandharbalok*, the transcendental, creative-spiritual realm, from which the novel’s title is derived. He explains to Apala: “For whatever aesthetic prowess and pleasures humans possess, there is a separate realm. That is the realm of the *gandharbas* (*gandharbalok*).³⁸⁰ In that world, the *deba gandharba*, Biśvābasu protects the pristineness of sacred music (*saṅgītāmṛta*); in that world, creativity flows and flourishes in blissful joy (*ānande*)” (2014: 12–13). Basu’s novel spins a gender dimension to the figure of *gandharba* (Bengali)/*gandharva* (Sanskrit) since they are usually conceptualised as masculine, while female celestial performers,

³⁷⁸ The legend goes back, at least, to the time of emperor Akbar in the 16th century. Akbar’s court musician, Tansen, is believed to have fallen ill due to the excessive practice of *rāga Dīpak* (associated with light and heat). Courtiers looked for artists of *rāga Megh* (cloud) to call upon the clouds to pour and calm Tansen. Miṃā Tānsen, as he was honoured, then developed the *rāga* now known as *Miṃān kī Malhār*. See Richard Widdess, “Raga as a key Concept” (2006). For further reading on monsoon *rāgas*, see Laura Leante, “The Cuckoo’s Song” (2018), 255–90. See Daniel Neuman, *The Life of Music in North India* (1980), 65–68. For a reading of intermediality in the emotions evoked by the onset of monsoon and its relation to music, cinema, and visual art, see Pernau & Rajamani (2016), 62–64.

³⁷⁹ *Ostād’jī* is a bengalised denotation of the Urdu/Hindi *Ustād-jī*, a respectful address for a teacher, especially of music, emerging from *ustād*, roughly equivalent to ‘maestro’.

³⁸⁰ Gandharba or Gandharva (Sanskrit) usually refers to, at least in contexts of literature, art, and music, “the celestial musicians or heavenly singers who form the orchestra at the banquets of the gods, and they belong together with the Apsarasas to Indra’s heaven, sharing also in his battles”. See entry ‘gandharva’ in Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary (1899), printed on 346. <https://www.sanskrit-lexicon.uni-koeln.de/scans/csl-apidev/servepdf.php?dict=MW&page=346> accessed on 17th June 2022.

The *Samsad Bengali-English Dictionary* explicates ‘*gandharba*’ as “one belonging to a class of demi-gods proficient in music and war”; it also refers to “a natural musician, a born musician”; ‘*gandharbalok*’ is “the land or abode of the Gandharvas” (2006), 298.

especially dancers, are seen to belong to another group of celestial beings, the *apsarās*.³⁸¹ *Apsarās* are often defined as wives to *Gandharvas*, especially since the *R̥gveda* mentions an *apsarā* coupled with a *gandharva*. In recent times, several artists have evoked the title of a *gandharva* for a female artist as well (even if through literature and film), especially as singers, while traditionally, the honorific suffix of 'gandharva' is given to exceptionally talented male singers like Sawai Gandharva (1886–1952) and Kumar Gandharva (1924–92).³⁸²

A parallel myth claims that the art of a *gandharva* is a curse of the gods – the curse is to spend his/her time on earth as an artist devoted to the feminine pursuits of beauty, skill, and emotions (*bhāv*). The ambivalent nature of such intense creative prowess, intertwined with the enhanced emotional capacity to feel and manifest feelings through art can be observed in contradictory readings of the same curse as a blessing, an ability (*abhiśāp*, Basu 2014: 12; *jādu*, Kaul 1989). The curse (or alternately blessing) of music and song for Apala cannot dictate her fate in Basu's novels, for the societal demands on a character like Apala are shown as indefatigable. But her art and insight haunt her social setting and are shown to shape the way Apala manoeuvres through the harsh reality of her setting, transcending the boundaries drawn upon her life, be it her ability to calm the affective illness of her friend by singing *Darbārī Kānhaḍā* (Basu 2014: 67) or in protecting her own space as an artist in an unhappy marriage and her demands for a room of her own to sing in (2014: 131–31, 99–100). The narrative presumes the temporal fluidity where *gandharva* nature is not just Apala's past but her true nature. In contrast, her present

381 Monier-Williams explains the 'apsarā' as transcending waters, "ap + √sr̥", 'going in the waters or between the waters of the clouds', a class of female divinities (sometimes called 'nymphs'); they inhabit the sky, but often visit the earth; they are the wives of the Gandharvas and have the faculty of changing their shapes at will". Page 59,3. <https://www.sanskrit-lexicon.uni-koeln.de/scans/csl-apidev/servepdf.php?dict=MW&page=59> accessed on 17th June 2022.

See also entry in Encyclopaedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/apsara> accessed on 21st June 2022.

382 C.f. Mani Kaul's biographic-performative film, *Siddheśvari* (1989), on the acclaimed Hindustani classical singer Siddheshwari Devi (1908–77) of Banaras/Varanasi. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dBfY-vHSjIw> accessed on 23rd May 2022.

The gendered aspect of musical art and performance in modern Indian societal restrictions have been also dealt with in this film. Through a retelling of the life stories of two exceptional singers, Kesarbai Kerkar (1892–1977) and Dhondutai Kulkarni (1927–2014), *The Music Room* (2007) by Namita Devidayal explores the conflicted nature of women singers of classical Hindustani music perceived on the one hand as endowed with celestial blessings and on the other hand, as fallen women, outcastes in society.

human and social life is merely an alternate projection of temporality, haunted by her true nature.

Otium, as an experiential immersion in music, turns into a transcendental experience in the narrative, acting as a link between the two realms Apala inhabits – the one where she is a celestial singer and the other where she is a struggling housewife. This transcendental experience is not only felt by Apala as she sings and enables the experience but also by other characters with a deep sense of music, who can resonate with this experience, for instance, Soham (2014: 75–78) and *ostād'jī*/Rameshvar Thakur (2014: 101–4). Music is repeatedly woven with sensual signifiers like the scent of flowers, the gentle touch of evening and morning breezes, and vibrations of the mindful body during acts of singing, taking the narrative experience to a complex spatiotemporal level. The aural (in the form of *rāgas*) and the sensory embodiment of Hindustani music create an alternate sense of space beyond the physical presence through what Steven Feld reads as the “complex and multiple presence and absence of the body”, where sensory experiences co-mingle and “blur into synesthesia” (2005: 180–81). Temporality is rendered fluid through the duration of a *rāga* and performance³⁸³, flowing into memory and into the alternate spatiotemporal level of the celestial realm of *gandharbalok*. For a listener, and perhaps, for a singer as well, such musical renditions can lead to an experience of “contemplative engagement with (and through) music” (Clayton 2000: 3). The narrative also opens up such experiences to the knowledgeable reader.

In the novel, the experience of a *rāga* sometimes spreads over several pages to signal the immersive element of music (Basu 2014: 75–77). The transcendental quality of the experience (listening or singing) also enables a healing effect in several episodes in the story, for Soham, for Apala’s son Rano, but also Apala herself, as she sings:

As the night darkens, her music, too, grows in depth. ‘*Mandarba bāje re*’ – with the words ‘*bāje re*’, Apala creates an ocean of *sur* (melody); she does not venture exhaustively into *tāna* or *layākāri*.³⁸⁴ She rests in the *bhāb* (emo-

³⁸³ On temporality and performance, see M. Clayton, “Introduction”, *Time in Indian Music* (2000), 1–7.

³⁸⁴ *Mandarba* or *mandar* is a percussion instrument; the phrase ‘*mandarba bāje re*’ is a refrain in this song. While *sur* is equivalent to tune or melody, *tāna* is a prolonged, repetitive work on the melody in the form of an extempore; a *tāna* is defined as that which “spreads a Rāga”. *Laṛa* or *layākāri* (the craft of *lay*) is the composition of intervals within two *mātras* or beats. For a detailed understanding of these terms, see Bimalakanta Roychaudhuri, *The Dictionary of Hindustani Classical Music* (2000), 59, 140.

tional range).³⁸⁵ Travelling from *bhāb* to *anubhāb*, she increases the pitch, uttering 'ānanda raho' (rest in bliss). She begins her descent, working through each minute variation of *kalyāṇ rāga*, spreading like the intense sweet scent of magnolia. When melody penetrates her vibrating heartbeats, she does not feel grief or joy; she has no worries. She feels like she is following a strong, mighty but intangible figure of love. What sweetness, what composure, what glory this journey entails! But it is a path full of twists and turns, at times impassable and obstructed, and at times, it is a great river – a grandiose, beautifully carved road. On both sides of it, armed with benediction and blessing, stand numerous invisible *gandharbas*. As if at the threshold of an estuary, the prolonged melody of her *kalyāṇ* flows like a powerful stream into the ocean of music. (Basu 2014: 61)

Despite her exceptional talents, Apala is unable to make a career in music owing to her gender and class restrictions; on the other hand, Soham, hailing from an upper-middle-class, 'cultured' family, follows the musical career that Apala could not pursue. Apala eventually agrees to marry into a family with no taste in music. Although her husband and in-laws are not opposed to music, they do not understand or appreciate her relationship with music, which, for Apala, is what she loves the most in life (2014: 32). While Apala manages to remain in touch with her music – on and off – throughout her life, the narrative reaches a climactic stage in chapter 25 (2014: 178) when she is confronted with an unbearable crisis as she loses her voice. For Apala, the reality of her unsatisfactorily mediocre life was balanced by her ability to sing, which set her free – even if momentarily – from the mundane world. Unable to contain her swelling emotions as she becomes voiceless, Apala immerses herself in expressing her music visually through painting: "Can you not see, I am performing the *ālāp* for *darbārī!*" (Basu 2014: 184–85) Although the plot of the narrative may be read as tragic, the immersive experience for Apala as an artist is transferred into the experience of reading – as if reading music – for the reader in Basu's rendition. The novel then becomes a text of immersion, where the mind's absorption into the fluidity of music successfully transforms the reader and the characters. In a narrative twist, the frame narrator is revealed to be, in fact, a character in the story – Apala's daughter, Sohini. In Sohini's confession on the last page of the novel, the narrator reaffirms Apala's other-worldly nature, asserting her to be a non-human, a celestial artist amid mortal beings, who transcended beyond the conflicts of her dual (human and non-human) manifes-

385 See Chapter 1, c.f. *Rasa* theory of *Nāṭyaśāstra*. In the context of musical experience, *bhāb/bhāva* is explained as "the mental change brought about by the perception of sentiment or emotion known as *Rasa*", i.e., the range of emotional transformations in the performance of the song (Roychaudhuri 2000).

tations – *mānabī hṛday'bhṛtti* and *gāndharbī prakṛti* (Basu 2014: 188). In this novel, otium is not addressed in its positive experiential qualities like immersion, contemplation, and creative bliss but in the agony of the human condition, the madness of the artist, and the transcendental experience of art. The primary emotion of otium is haunting in the persistence of the other-worldly and its access to experiences of otium that interrupts the social and societal unhappy spatio-temporality of here and now.

6.4 Conversations with the Dead and the Undead: *Hār'bārt*, *Phyātāru*, and Insurgent Idleness

In this section, I read otium in formulations of subversion for the alienated individual who feels marginalised and is deemed a failure in this 'fast' and 'smart' (accelerated/technologically advanced) world. Simultaneously, otium (or its absence) is consciously used to critique social discrimination. While in Nabarun Bhattacharya's 1993 novel *Hār'bārt*, otium is interpreted in the sense of alienation and melancholy for the protagonist, in the *Phyātāru* stories, it is experienced and enjoyed in a subversive sense, along with a feeling of uselessness as well as playful (and yet serious) revenge towards an ideology of justified insurgence. However, the subversive agency of melancholy in *Hār'bārt* should not be overlooked. Both Harbart Sarkar and the *phyātāru* haunt contemporary society that has dealt them a fate of abuse and injustice. In this discriminatory scenario of increasing material greed and ensuing corruption, the insatiable aspirations of the rich, consequent dehumanisation of the lower classes, the loss of political and ethical resonance in society and the suffering of the marginalised, otium is conceptualised through subversive agency. This subversion manifests in being haunted and haunting, expressed in scathing and satirical critique of the *status quo*.

Harbart Sarkar (a bengalicisation of Herbert) grew up an orphan with his cousins in a lower-middle-class household in Calcutta. His few belongings consist of his curl-handled umbrella, his uncle's handed-down Ulster coat, and two books from his grandfather's collection, entitled *Tales of the Afterlife* (*Paraloker kathā*) and *Mysteries of Afterlife* (*Paralok-rahasya*). He hangs around with a group of lazy, idle men from the neighbourhood; together they spend most of their time drinking hard liquor and cursing. While growing up, Harbart is gradually influenced by his reading of the mentioned books and becomes emotionally isolated and deeply concerned with death. This engagement with death escalated especially after the murder of his nephew, Binu, in a case of police brutality during the Naxalite insurgency of the 1970s in Calcutta. Harbart comes to believe that he can communicate with the dead and eventually starts a

business enterprise called ‘Conversations with the dead’/“*Mṛter sahit kathopakathan*”. Claiming that he can help people connect with their loved ones who have departed, Harbart begins to make some money before he is threatened and hounded by the ‘West Bengal Rationalist Association’. The novel is witty, full of dark humour and satire, and is narrated in ‘filthy language’, full of slang and cuss words.

This raw, so-called ‘filthy’ narrative is punctuated by many recurrent moments of poignant solitude; these constitute Harbart’s reflections and memories and descriptions of dwelling in an elaborated, fluid, elastic sense of time (moment), especially when he finds himself alone on his rooftop terrace. Dreams and reality (the distinction being blurred) are recounted, often in the form of surreal scenes, sometimes only witnessed by lizards and cockroaches; sometimes, they are narrated as unobserved. Some of these scenes reveal the protagonist in contemplation and recollection, in isolation, smoking on the terrace, which acts as a space of rest and contentment in his otherwise miserable life. The rooftop terrace becomes a subversive space of freedom for Harbart; from the vantage point of the terrace, he could see the flying kites, the expanse of the sky and the city spread in front of him (Bhattacharya 2010: 25–26). From there, he could watch Buki, the girl who drew his interest. It was his own, intimate space (“*cil’chād’tāi chilo Hār’bārter jāy’gā*”); it is where he dreamed: “The astonishing dream that had empowered him social status and fame; but that had also, eventually, lead him to his end. That dream, too, he had dreamt here” (2010: 24).

This dream was of his ability to communicate with Binu, whose final words continued to haunt Harbart (2010: 36). Through Binu’s involvement in the Naxal insurgency, the spectre that haunts the narrative is inadvertently that of the communist revolution, signalled in the dialogue between Binu and Harbart about personal sacrifice and social justice (2010: 31). The dream led Harbart to explore his abilities and start his ‘business’ of communicating with the dead. Harbart’s dreams, thoughts, and hallucinations attain a fluidity in the narrative, steeped in a mood of surrealism. A blue-faced fairy conjured up by Harbart recurs throughout the narrative, attempting to touch his life of despair, symptomatic of the enigma of life’s fulfilments. Such moments are described and narrated as happening in a parallel present or an (im)possible future. These episodes punctuate the narrative, resulting in a temporally fluid plot. Starting with descriptions of Harbart undergoing a terrifying emotional and physical experience, the narrative unfurls into the past – the past that was his childhood and the already scripted future of that past – Harbart’s growing up and his eventual suicide, interjected by comments and visits from his dead parents. The narrative returns at the end of his life and goes on to narrate a haunted future that may or may not come to pass:

Perhaps many days after this, or perhaps many, many years later, some little boy will run, letting go of his parents' clasping hands, towards some antique shop, willing to stay entranced as he gazes through dusty windowpanes at the fairy holding light in her hands. When his parents would have brought him home against his will, perhaps his lips would quiver in hurt pride. Perhaps this may not come to pass at all.

But if it does, perhaps, even later, when the small boy begins to shiver in his sleep, no one would have noticed it at all. These things happen all the time. Even later, perhaps some severed kite will have floated across many skies, to eventually rest on Harbart's rooftop terrace. Perhaps no one will know about it. In the morning mist the terrace is very unclear, very obstinate. (Bhattacharya 2010: 80)

Harbart's socialising with idle men is contrasted with his alienation and the quest for a semblance of resonance in the quietness of his solitude on the terrace and in the desperate claims of conversing with the dead. The presence of the dead looms large in his life, enabling a subversive sense of communication that he does not seem to find amidst the living.

Written roughly around ten years later, situated in the twenty-first century, the *Phyātāru* narratives are formulated within a dialogic, interactive social set-up where people who are considered utter failures in society are recruited by their leader, Madan, to become a *phyātāru*. A *phyātāru* is neither dead nor a ghost but a repressed and morphed human being with the supernatural ability to fly whenever he/she wants. The name draws on the onomatopoeic *phyāt*, a quick, flapping sound, possibly denoting the flutter of a wing, and the *āru*, a reference to the ability of flight. In Bengali, *orā* and *uru* are often colloquially used as suffixes added to a noun denoting someone or something in flight and may not be reliable or graspable. As Nabarun Bhattacharya himself explicates, "all they do is fly around" (the Bengali phrase he uses is "*ure berāno*" – casually describes someone roaming around idly) and "generate ruckus here and there" (2015: n.p.).³⁸⁶ The *Phyātāru* narratives are Bhattacharya's deeply political response to the loss of any sense of social ethic in current society in West Bengal; "... but *phyātāru* is not just a matter of politics," he clarifies, "*Phyātāru* is an attitude towards politics" (ibid.). However, in contrast to the hyperlocality of *Hār'bārt*, these stories are located in broader networks of contemporary society, "simultaneously global and local".³⁸⁷ They problem-

³⁸⁶ The quotation is from a page of comments underlined as "Nabāruṅ Bhaṭṭācāryer Nānā Sākṣāt-kār Theke" (from various conversations with Nabarun Bhattacharya) in Bhattacharya's book titled *Phyātāru Biṃśati* (2015). It is not paginated and precedes the table of contents.

³⁸⁷ Editors' Introduction, *Nabarun Bhattacharya* (2020) n.p.

atise the local and urban society of contemporary Calcutta in the stories “*Suśil Samāje Phyātāru*” (Phyatarus in civil society), “*Bāimelāj Phyātāru*” (Phyatarus at the bookfair), “*Rabīndrajañantite Phyātāru*” (Phyatarus at Tagore’s centenary). They are also located within international narratives of chaotic globalisation, in “*Āipiele Phyātāru*” (Phyatarus at IPL cricket match) and “*Global Terrore Phyātāru*” (Phyatarus amidst global terror).

The three *phyātāru* characters who recur in the stories are Madan, a sort of leader of the gang; DS (or Director’s Special), an unemployed share-market tout; and Purandar Bhat, the budding but socially excluded, marginalised poet. The three men are utter failures amongst others in the present competitive society. Madan’s and DS’s wives have left them for other men with lucrative jobs, and no one pays any attention to Bhat or his poetry. Bhat’s character (arguably a satirical poke at Bhattacharya himself) is ironically utilised to mock Calcutta’s self-representation as a city of culture and literary merits (particularly, in stories like “*Kabi Sammelane Phyātāru*” (Phyatarus at the poetic symposium) and “*Rabīndrajañantite Phyātāru*”). Although Bhat is a usual surname, here, Bhattacharya wields it satirically to hint at his own name and the uselessness of Purandar’s poetry – *bhāt*, in Bengali, rubbish or nonsense. The three regularly meet and drink liquor sold on the black market; they criticise social norms and rituals, contemporary society and life. At other times, they are seriously committed to generating chaos at social gatherings. Their dialogues, written in slang and cuss words, often hold profound sociological, philosophical, and psychological truths.

These miscreants, though in many ways anti-social and responsible for instigating chaos in the city, do not cause any real damage; neither do they engage in meaningless theft or robbery. They hang around idly or fly to various places, hatching plots to punish society through these subversive activities. Idleness, for them, is the rebellious possibility of flying across fields and rooftop terraces to chatter away, drink, and smoke cigarettes. Spatial opportunities of idleness for people from lowlife are rendered inaccessible in Calcutta’s capitalised urban space. Geared with the powers of their supernatural wings, their subversive spectrality enables the *phyātāru* to cross class restrictions. The narrative does not turn them into invisible beings; spectrality within the narrative enables them to fly in plain sight, causing astonishment and shock amidst onlookers. The *phyātāru* fly, when they want, to the banks of the Hooghly River, over people’s terraces and fields, to places where they would otherwise not have been allowed entry. They mess around these spaces and urinate here and there to avenge class discrimination but more so to express an anarchic sense of freedom, engendering idleness as an agency of insurgency. The spaces of leisure, which are now transformed into markets of consumption, are particularly under attack; the *phyātāru* primarily target “pleasure resorts”, entertainment

locations, and restaurants like “Floatel” (Bhattacharya 2015: 12–13).³⁸⁸ Further critiquing the discrimination surrounding spaces of leisure and idle freedom, Bhattacharya allows the *phyātāru* one free space of their own, where they gather to hang around and discuss anti-social activities, without flight:

The ‘park’ is the tiny triangular field near DS’s house, half of which is for general urination, and the other half, a children’s park; there is a single bench without a backrest – and nothing much. Purandar and DS were sitting on it. DS was playing a game of Ludo on a board torn in the middle, laid out on the top of his briefcase. He had set up the red and the yellow squares, and only one red token was out. [...] Purandar was reading out aloud from a handbill-like newspaper. And in between his reading, he stole side glances to observe a haggard crow perched on a branch, trying to itch its beak with one of its feet. (Bhattacharya 2015: 127–28)

Bhattacharya’s subversive attacks on society are directed against its indiscriminate consumerism and its glorification of capital at the expense of human suffering and social justice. The portrayal of contemporary urban Calcutta depicts a wasted rat race in a dying city: people compete against one another, chasing (commercial) success. In his essay “Fyataru as Political Society”, Anindya Purakayastha identifies Bhattacharya as “one of those writers who vigorously fumes against class elitism of the civic space” (2020, n.p.). The “political war-cry” of the subaltern *phyātārus* – “*phyāt-phyāt- sãĩ sãĩ*” – the chant that enables them to fly is, in fact, directed against the *leisure class* that has turned society into the sham that it is. Through stories that strip society’s self-image as educated, cultured, literate, and significantly ‘civil’ (*sušĩl*), Bhattacharya posits the “*fyataru-fic(a)tion*” of Calcutta, narrating the spectre that haunts the consumerist, greedy, (un)civil society, which he identifies as ‘*hārāmĩr hāṭĩ*’ (market of cheats). The uncanny wings of the subalterns are designed to haunt the cruel elite and generate justified fear among them. However, it must be remarked that there is no attempt at getting any prudent message across to this social disorder – the *phyātāru*, like Bhattacharya, seem aware that society at large is unchangeable, and the *phyātāru* have no future. This demolition of a possible future or a decent life robbed from the masses results in the haunting of civil society. Haunting is expressed in the demolition of property, defecation, and urination in private and public spaces to engender chaos and anarchy. Behind this haunting is a desperate cry for otium – deemed and doomed to remain unattainable for the subaltern post-colonial poverty-struck masses – be it in the lonely

388 An event space and restaurant in Calcutta, a floating hotel on the river.

despair of Harbart's surreal clairvoyance or the subversive, collective insurgence of the spectrally-winged *phyātāru*.

6.5 The Spectral *Flâneur* and his Idle Afternoon: “*Tafriḥ kī Ek Dopahar*”

Concerning idleness and hauntology, Khalid Jawed's long story/*kahānī*, “*Tafriḥ kī Ek Dopahar*”, is particularly relevant to our reading of haunting as a signifier of the absence and quest for otium. Narrated by a ghost, the story is, in fact, a long-drawn-out philosophical monologue. The ghost communicates the narration through a medium – a living, contemporary writer. The writer wants the story to fit into a narrative formula or at least have a plot, but the ghost resists, rendering the story through several dissonant temporal techniques. Rejecting words, language and meaning, he wanders the world searching for what he identifies as the ‘melody’ (“*lai*”) of the narrative/his thoughts.³⁸⁹ He knows that he will have to venture into an abstract, surreal chronotope to look for the music, where the designs of human civilisation, history, culture, and moral codes do not exist (Jawed 2008 a: 116). The four-part story first discusses what it means to be a ghost, drawing distinctions between ghosts and demons based on the Urdu concept of haunting and idle wandering, both signified in the narrative as *bhaṭaknā*. At the same time, idle wandering or strolling is also described as *tafriḥ*, and *bhaṭaknā* has other connotations besides haunting.

The ghost-narrator claims that only those are turned into ghosts who cannot tolerate the pain of an unjust death. Caught between two worlds, ghosts do not belong anywhere; they must exist, haunt and drift eternally. The haunting of the ghost is deeply associated with its intense emotions; in fact, haunting attains the physical manifestation of the emotion. If one wishes to extinguish a ghost, he claims, one must first stop it from haunting. Discussing haunting itself, the spectral narrator links it directly to the activity and state of wandering aimlessly or strolling – in Urdu, *tafriḥ*. The second part of the narrative revisits the ghost's memories of a time of innocence and hope that still haunt him: memories of going to the cinema with Apiya and Baiju – his sisters; of Parvin – a young girl to whom he was attached in his youth; of a friend who reminds him of Dostoevsky's character Ivan Fyodorovich Karamazov/Vanya, who dared to return the ticket of life's drama/spectacle (*tamāśā*) to god. The

³⁸⁹ Jawed's concern regarding the dissonance between language and story is also reflected in critical essays written at the same time. See *Kahānī, Maut aur Ākhrī Bidesī Zabān* (2008 b), 65–84.

narrative links spectrality (haunting) and spectacle (*tamāṣā*) with cinema, and it is the ruins of the previously frequented cinema hall where the ghost continues to idle during the narrated afternoon. Idle wandering and haunting are woven together as resistance to the dystopian nature of contemporary life in the city of Delhi, where commercialisation, competition, and poverty have taken over the possibility of a fulfilling life (and/or death). All the characters are depicted as having an aura of innocence in the past that was snatched away from them: Apiya died a cruel, early death due to illness, Baiju turned towards obsessive religious devotion, and Parvin – who had wanted to educate herself – led a ruined life with asthma and poverty. Frustrated with the meanness of life and pangs of poverty, the unnamed friend murdered his wife and then took his own life.

Throughout the narrative, there are several comparisons contrasting madness and logical wisdom, high art and ‘cheap’/ “*sasti*” feelings, the freedom of wandering and the traps of the market. A sharp and outraged critic of rapid economic and industrial transformations in the city, the narrator identifies haunting/wandering and being haunted as the only way of existing; even in death, he is trapped in idle wandering/*bhatakna*/haunting. Here, the spectral narrator directly addresses the dilemma of otium and haunting. At the beginning of the narrative, he asserts that death is completely devoid of any possibility of wandering/otium. In the story, wandering or *tafrīh* is akin to its implications of otium in its ambivalence and complexity. Both *bhatakna* and *tafrīh* are wandering, but *bhatakna* is depicted as trapped, although adrift, and *tafrīh* (from the Arabic root *f-r-h*, implying pleasantness) is wandering in an enjoyable, pleasant, free manner. The narrator claims that not only is a free sense of wandering implied by the lexeme (*tafrīh*) but that this idle and free wandering also allows for contemplation and insight (“*baṣīrat*”). As the narrative progresses, albeit in flashback episodes, the narrator dwells on the freedom of wandering that haunting allows him after death. Devoid of life’s narrow restrictions, like Bhattacharya’s flying humans, Jawed’s narrator, too, can fly at any time and roam around idly as and when he desires. However, the conflict between the two kinds of idleness – *bhatakna* and *tafrīh* – remains. *Tafrīh*, the narrative seems to assert, is the joyous, recreational, free idling of the living, whereas *bhatakna* is the alienated drift of the dead who did not have the freedom of otium in life.

The theme of cinema/spectacle/visuality is central to this narrative, where cinema is a metaphor for the dramatic narrative of life, and the desire to watch films symbolises a willing participation. While several impediments have repeatedly deterred the narrator from enjoying films freely, after his unjust and cruel death, the desire to watch, with invested emotions, is transformed into an arena of distant spectatorship, associated with the melancholy of haunting

(passive, unliving). The repeated act of watching a film only until the interval and then selling the ticket off to someone else for the latter half of the show gradually evolves to the theme of *returning* the ticket; this theme is later stretched to symbolise Vanya's returning of the ticket in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. Another allegory is formulated in the demolition of the haphazard, old, and beloved cinema hall with its intimate pasts and the establishment of the multiplex shopping mall that promises life to be an easy act of strolling but in the glory of false, fake moon-light. This destruction of the remnants of his past life is witnessed in despair by the spectral narrator, who sits perched on a nearby *pīpal* tree. The social reality of the present is described as sitting in an empty cinema hall where no films are being shown, and no emotions – no catharsis, no relief – are experienced. The emotions here are, in fact, directly linked to otium, while wandering or *tafrīḥ* itself is also described in the narrative as a *jazba* (an emotion, a feeling), and wandering as an experience of otium is then depicted as a form of haunting – it is identified as the narrator's sole enduring interest (*śauq*):

Wandering has its mysterious freedom. It feels like taking off one's heavy baggage, flinging it across the street, feeling lucid in one's limbs and drifting aimlessly through the lanes. It is the joy of having the courage to walk on the wrong side of the lane at times with a sheepish smile and a content heart. Like a twisted state of mind, it also renders one's heart full. It is a perpetual trap, a labyrinth indeed, this aimless loitering and wandering. (Jawed 2008 a: 126)

Eventually, the narrator details the circumstances of his unjust death and reveals the identities of collaborators in his murder. The betrayal is located within the social, intimate, and societal; life transforms into a dystopian film for the cinema lover. Idling, wandering, and haunting are not only semantics associated with otium in this text but also indisputable signifiers of subversion and social criticism. Like Bhattacharya's flying humans, Jawed's ghost indulges in the trope of idling as a subversive drift as well as the rhetoric of criticism towards the discriminatory present, mourning a haunted future. However, unlike Bhattacharya's characters, who associate idle freedom with political revenge, Jawed's haunted *flâneur* prefers wandering as a passive alternative to revenge. As a staunch advocate of idle wandering, more so in death than in life, he asks the rhetorical question of how and why experiences of otium, like idle wandering/*tafrīḥ*, are still misconceptualised in society as insignificant activities. He emphasises the urgency of wandering and strolling – as philosophy and praxis – to counter the discriminations of the world order, devoid of any sense of beauty, emotions, or melody. At the same time, this aimless and idle wandering occurs only as the past of the narrator's predicament of haunting

and remaining haunted forever. While this idle wandering is Derridean in its hauntological predisposition of existential interrogation, the wandering in this narrative can also be read as Benjaminian *flânerie*, owing to its investigative and observant nature. The ambivalence of the spectrality in *flânerie* here can be seen to elicit the question: is this equation of wandering and haunting then aimed towards the necessity of what Brian O'Connor terms 'idle freedom', and that by itself, idleness "is meaningful and real enough to deserve protection" (Jawed 2018: 3)? Or is idleness/haunting used as a critique of discriminatory society? I unpack this question in the following concluding section of the chapter to explore the relation between otium and resonance.

6.6 Chapter Conclusion: Otium and Resonance

The recurring trend of highlighting dissonance, alienation, and disenchantment – processes that signify an absence of otium – in contemporary South Asian texts corresponds to the theme of a "resonanceless" world depicted in modern literature in Europe.³⁹⁰ Hartmut Rosa locates this requiem for resonance in modern literature as "characterized by the radical disruption and destabilization of man's relationship to the world" (2019: Ch. X., n. pag.). While Rosa's assertion of the causes of this lack of resonance is historically recognised, his broader claim that resonance is the answer or the apt response to the problem of acceleration (2019: 1) needs some deliberation. Acceleration and the high speed of modern society have been seen as opposing forces to both resonance as well as otium. It has also been established early on by several scholars (c.f. Vickers) that otium is not the opposite of work, but of *officium*/obligations/efficiency in work– translated by Rosa as acceleration/escalation (2019: "In Lieu of a Foreword"). When we think of otium beyond semantics and language and attempt to understand it as a concept in social history and human experience, depicted and discussed in literature as a function of the self and subjectivity, it becomes clear that understanding otium means understanding relations between people, between ourselves, and to the world we inhabit; precisely the theory of resonance that Rosa puts forth. Otium, therefore, can be read and identified through a relation of resonance and the emotions through which resonance is enabled and expressed. But what are the hindrances to realising and experiencing otium?

³⁹⁰ See Rosa, *Resonance*, Chapter 10, section 2. See also *Alienation and Acceleration* (2010), 13–14.

What needs to be resolved in order to champion otium and experience states of otium, as the above readings of contemporary texts from South Asia seem to suggest, is the axis of discrimination and exclusion in society, not only those of pace and speed on which we formulate notions of globalisation today. The problem of inequality, which Rosa himself asserts is integral to the relation of resonance – as *cause* and *consequence* – is also seen to cause and lead to the inaccessibility of otium. The recurring reference to haunting, so inherently located in resistance to accepting injustice, demonstrates that haunting and otium are deeply connected concepts of the self – of otherness and subjectivity, respectively. Haunting then highlights the privilege dimension of otium, the “discourses of recrimination against the excluded other” (Fludernik 2014: 131) – as both individual and social experiences. Emotionally, haunting is directed towards both expressing grief through mourning and hope through persistence, return, and recurrence. In the texts read in this chapter, leisurely states of being and artistic subjectivity pertain to the pursuit of the leisurely, free, idle (as worthy in itself) subjectivity (O’Connor 2018: 179), as well as a critique against discrimination that creates obstacles in accessing that subjectivity.

Simultaneously, a recognition of the urgent need for otium for individuals as well as communities can decentre the demands of a capitalist, homocentric world where unjust and alienated labour paves the way for an allegedly successful/fulfilling life, or rather to inaccessibility, unavailability, and dissonance, or *Unverfügbarkeit* (Rosa 2018). On the other hand, adherence to otium enables a more resonating and less unequal world. Laziness, empathy, and idle freedom as depicted in the narratives of Intizar Husain, response to one’s artistic subjectivity and vocational calling as demonstrated in Basu’s and Jawed’s novels, can lead to formulations of a better world – or so the texts seem to suggest. In Nabarun Bhattacharya’s texts, otium and idleness attain a vantage point from where social inequality can be observed and resisted. While hauntology – as a conceptual-analytical tool – has enabled a pluralistic reading of otium in the texts discussed here, as expressed through narrative, through its transcendental, transgressive aspect, and through subversion and critical agency, it also draws our attention to the relation of resonance and the association of the other with the self. In *Hār̥bār̥ṭ* and the *Phyātāru* narratives, social acceptance and inclusion, and rejection of class discrimination are argued as ways to inhabit a better world. *Gāndharbī* claims a transgressive space for the artist, irrespective of class and gender constrictions. “*Tafriḥ kī Ek Dopahar*” demands a just world where it is possible to resonate with one’s subjectivity, as opposed to a world filled with capitalist prejudice and mindless social obeisance. Intizar Husain’s narratives hope for a world with resonance, where humans are responsible for each other and for nature, animals, and the environment. What is common in all texts is a plea for empathy and emotional resonance. The narrative voices recognise that a

phenomenological transformation is required for such a world to be possible. This transformation can be achieved through otium and emotions that enable resonance – calm, peacefulness, responsibility, sympathy, and love. The dissonance in the texts read is addressed and echoed through the possibility of the narrative. The narrative possibility of subjectivity and the essence of belonging to a social, resonating, and inclusive community can be argued to be attained through the literary, wherein the other is allowed space and opportunity.

Through stories, according to Husain, humans can listen to and speak to others – trees, legends, and the spectres we tend to distance ourselves from. By incorporating the spectre in our literary expressions, we may be able to listen to its narrative and share ours beyond the binary between the self and the other. The collective and the community are emphasised by Husain and Bhattacharya, as well as by Basu. Jawed's narrative foregoes the possibility of resonating with the community, focusing on individual alienation; yet, to tell his story, the writer, the reader, and the ghost respond to each other. Haunting and spectrality manifest unprocessed mourning and an elegiac desire for otium. The response to haunting and to the absence of otium, then, lies in resonance, and literature takes the shape of a requiem for these resonating vibrations, phenomenologically, in the musical, in the sonority of response, beyond narrative formulae. Resonance does not entail good or positive feelings but being able to recognise and respond to the other. This has been the argument for reading otium through an emotional approach as well – which does not mean reading otium only through good or positive emotions but to open up space for understanding moods, feelings, and the historical context of individual and community emotions. Emotional involvement with the literary allows a state of contemplation and reflection through resonance that may be shared by literary communities.

Otium is manifested in emotions within the literary. The emotional manifestation is elusively formulated in overtures of music and melody or other sensory systems beyond the fields of semantics, as argued by Jawed's ghost. Nevertheless, the emotional-semantic field can be located within the literary. Responding to Rita Felski's question – of whether resonance theory can help us rethink literary criticism (2020), this chapter, much like the broader study, has attempted to read literature critically but with the intent to respond and resonate with the underlying moods and emotions in the texts, to foreground the concept of otium. Haunting attains a resonance within the literature discussed here, where the texts, as manifested in mourning and longing in the form of literature, provide the muted spectres with the space to wander, idle, and drift. Otium then emerges as an experience in emotions invoked in the literary and through literature, where it can be located as resonance amidst the asynchronicity of being.