

## Coda

*I too am dying out from Calcutta, tram.  
Written off because I'm too slow, obstinate, unprofitable.  
Nabarun Bhattacharya<sup>391</sup>*

In Nabarun Bhattacharya's Bengali poem "Trām" (2020 [2004]), the slighted poet indulges in a reflective monologue with the sedentary vehicle, a remnant of the metropolitan's past. A mode of transportation introduced to the city by its colonial administrators, familiarised by the local inhabitants through quotidian habit, cultural visuality and literary imagination, it is a vehicle much mocked in contemporary times. The tram is rendered dysfunctional in the present for its tardiness and its rattling sound as it pointlessly rambles through the metropolis at its own leisurely pace against all sense of efficiency, speed, and traffic. An oft-repeated jocular way of discussing the tram in Calcutta involves exaggerated references to one's rapidly advancing age as one commutes by tram. Other remarks compare the speed of people cycling or swiftly walking past a moving tram as the vehicle reluctantly drudges at a snail's pace, stretching out the feeling of being suspended in time. Interwoven with this sense of slow, inefficient, and sauntering pace, only fit for the purpose of idling away one's time while gazing out of its windows, is an anachronistic sense of ruin embodied by the metropolis, often described as a 'dying city'. References to Calcutta as *dying* echo the feeling of being left behind in the economic-developmental phase of India's rapid market-oriented growth, embodied by younger cities, often reflected in self-mockery, for instance, in the 2012 Bengali film *Bhūt'er Bhabīṣyat*. (The future of the past/ghosts).

In a recent article published in *The New York Times*, Emily Schmall proposes 'nostalgia' as an emotion associated with the almost obliterated trams of

---

<sup>391</sup> "Tram" [2004]. Trans. Supriya Chaudhuri. *Nabarun Bhattacharya: Aesthetics and Politics* (2020) n.p. Part of the poem is quoted later in this coda, also in Chaudhuri's translation.

Calcutta, deeming them as quaint as a ‘fairy tale’.<sup>392</sup> Not only is the comparison discordant, projecting a superficial imposition of quaintness as a vector of misreading, but it is also inaccurate to identify this sense of ruin as nostalgia. Reading nostalgia in this context, offhandedly, lends to a construction of the past in fetishising emotions and aesthetics. The tram is still operational, and its disadvantages are starkly felt; the nuisance it creates in traffic hardly generates emotions akin to longing or yearning. The emotional association with the tram, of a disjointed past’s presence in the present, and possibly the future, is anachronistic against the pace of the twenty-first century, defined by “fast food, debentures, shares, smart money” (Bhattacharya 2020). Nostalgia, as we have seen, is an emotion with an ambiguous range, at times expressed in longing for a lost past and often in the conflicted remembrance of the past in coming to terms with its loss. The past, embodied by the tram, is not lost but continues to persist in the present, with the possibility of doing so in the future – leaving open several questions of temporality. The tram has been an integral factor in Calcutta’s journey toward acceleration and escalation and has served as an efficient commute for its millions of workers for years. The past relevance of this once-efficient vehicle is now transformed into the possibility of a leisurely ride in the present context. Once a symbol of modernisation and the city’s technological prowess, a signifier of the cosmopolitanism of Calcutta, it is perceived as redundant today. Similarly, once the seat of technological and cultural innovation, the city continues to move at a pace that doesn’t sit well with the speed and advancements of the present. Nevertheless, the question of the future haunts both the tram and the city that boasted it once as a ‘first’ (the first one in Asia, kicked off in 1900). The tram also reminds one of the erasures of the future – a future that, as Schmall’s article hints at – will probably not unfurl. The tram’s significance in the future has been addressed in grievances and protests by both ‘tram-lovers’ and those concerned with the future – not of the tram system itself, but of the planet’s ecology, calling, instead, for upgrading the sustainable tram system.<sup>393</sup> Not only are such concerns seen as antithetical to the essence of speed and efficiency, but the trams have been almost abolished, barring a few in the city. The poet of the epigraph finds himself in a similar value-exchange approximation, where a future sprawls ahead, with seemingly no necessity for poetry. He contemplates a sympathetic dialogue with the voiceless tram, based on this shared association of anachronistic presence –

---

<sup>392</sup> Emily Schmall, “Kolkata’s ‘Fairy Tale’ Trams, Once Essential, Are Now a Neglected Relic” (2021).

<sup>393</sup> “Kolkata: Tram lovers, activists plan protest against withdrawal” (2019). See also Krishnendu Bandyopadhyay, “Save and modernize trams, demand citizens” (2023).

being out of sync with the times and unable to express their sustainable relevance to the 'smart' present and questions of the future.

The disjoint in temporalities and emotions continues as pressing questions of the future, pace, and peace (an individual as well as a political expression of otium) haunt us on a global scale. The 'smart' present of Bhattacharya's poem is already fleeting, and our present is now being re-formulated in new shapes and shades. Acceleration, techno-capitalism, climate and energy crises, wars and a global-scale pandemic have brought newer transformations in society, within individuals, and between them, not only in a global but also within a planetary framework. Questions of the past are not yet passé, but past approaches to temporalities have culminated in unsuccessful projections of emotional and psychoanalytical dissonance like burnout (Han 2015) and environmental disasters (A. Ghosh 2016). How individuals and communities feel time is constantly shifting, not necessarily in linear vectors, but in multiple fissures and fluidities. Calcutta/Kolkata is not a dying city anymore but a drowning and choking city, like several other urban metropolises across the world. The divides of the north-south and east-west won't hold for long in the looming future, as they currently demonstrate several fissures. The current energy crises in the global north correlate to the incessant transport network and acceleration projects that threaten ecological disasters in the global south. How can we locate otium, emotions, and literature in this fast-changing world where our political and planetary concerns are urgently turned towards stability and sustainability? In this coda, I would like to reflect on the 'global' questions relating to otium and how this study on South Asia or the 'global south' responds to and resonates with these questions. This is not to offer resolutions to any crises mentioned above but to ask how entangled and ambivalent concepts like otium, literature, and emotions are relevant in the ongoing and extensive transformations.

The present study registers two significant aspects in relation to the global transformation of otium, idleness, and leisureliness. On the one hand, otium is seen as contrasted with modernity's accelerated pace; this renders memories of a leisurely pace of life to be processed differently in different emotions – the question of the future, in relation to the past and the present, with regards to *pace*, remains open. Haunting and hope are some ways in which we feel for the future; these emotions regarding otium within the literary have been addressed. Literature continues to remain the space where emotions and otium are experienced and expressed. And one significant possible scope of study is the intermediality of the literary, the ecocritical turn literature has taken, and what is now conceptualised as the Anthropocene (A. Ghosh 2016; Zapf 2016). On the other hand, and closely linked to the first point, otium has to be read in its aspects of privilege and power; in the past, in certain moralist and socio-cultural

recriminations of the underprivileged, often categorised as lazy and indolent (by the privileged sections of society) (Fludernik 2014: 130–31); in the future, the problem of privilege, exclusion, and asymmetrical conceptualisations loom large. As already argued, current trajectories of work-leisure binaries originate in forms of resource management – ecological and human – within frameworks of colonial capitalism (Alatas 1977) as well as forms of knowledge (Cohn 1996). These concerns relate to the first point of pace in the privileged access to time, space, and resources for experiences of otium. But these problems have persisted in the past, and the present alienation, acceleration, and crises are indisputable trajectories of such asymmetrical conceptualisations.

The entanglement of these two aspects has always formed the backdrop of how concepts of the self, embedded within society, are felt, negotiated, and expressed. Locating otium as a function and expression of the self, the context of colonial and postcolonial, multilingual and heterogenous South Asia attains immense significance in responding to these questions. In conflict or collaboration, these two aspects have been central to this study. They have been addressed chronologically – from the colonial to the postcolonial and onto the neo-liberal, and chronotopically – between interactions and encounters, projected within a regional (between South Asian communities) and a global (between South Asia and Europe) framework. In both nexuses, the significance of the ‘other’ emerges as a key player – in relations (between individuals and communities), in knowledge (of the other, through literature, language, and culture), and in ontological formulations (the human and the non-human). Conceptualising the other has been a critical approach to conceptualising the self (Said 1978) and addressing subjects and sources of the self (Taylor 1989). In conceptualising and naming functions of the other, we observe an enormous asymmetry. As demonstrated in [Chapter 1](#) and elsewhere (Noor 2021), such highly asymmetrical contexts and naming methods require us to look for ways of reading concepts beyond semantic signifiers to grasp the emotional range of such concepts. This transformation of the semantic to the emotional creates the possibility of resonance, a probable trajectory of otium in the future. Resonance, based on a “previous similarity between the subjects”, reproduces and amplifies the vibrations of “one subject in another” (Pernau 2021a: 9). Resonance is also a fruitful way of conceptualising the self and other in its pace – the time required for one to acknowledge and recognise the other; and in communication – where language also becomes shared in effect and affect rather than in differences. These two aspects of resonance correlate to experiences of otium and literary conceptualisations. Resonance also hints at the question of a shared space or environment, to which we will shortly return.

Exploring emotions associated with semantic networks has allowed an in-depth understanding of how these experiences are felt and conceptualised. Fur-

thermore, these conceptualisations, too, can, in effect, lead to communication and acceptance of entangled concepts, resulting in resonance within a global conceptual historical framework. Semantic asymmetries can always be overcome, this book demonstrates, if one engages with knowledge of the past (of the self and the other) that is expressed not in semantic data – as colonialist and imperialist modes of knowledge production have established, but in expressions that include and are embedded in emotions – in effect, literature, and other modes of expression. Acquisition of knowledge – i.e., conceptualising the other – must move away from the merely intellectual, since our intellect is not devoid of interests and feelings, to one that includes the emotional, the material, and the sensorial. While knowledge archived in ritual, environmental, and culinary praxis has gained increasing significance in conceptualising methods, the literary, too, has immense potential to open up ways of historicising, unpacking, and exploring the self and the other. In this, otium, literature, and emotions are vital players.

Reading otium, this study demonstrates, entails unpacking the concept by addressing it as entangled, accompanied by literary creativity, innovation, and expression. To explore how otium is negotiated within the literary, I have explored idleness and leisureliness as manifested in emotions. In these manifestations, we witness the nuanced ways in which literature responds to the powerful counterconcepts of otium. Locating emotions as central to the study of the entangled concept of literature with otium, the book reads otium in expressions of nostalgia for leisurely pasts, topophilia as necessary for creativity and enchantment, melancholia as protesting imperialism, acceleration, and capitalism, and notions of civility and pedagogy as mediation of leisureliness in the face of the impending global expansion of neoliberalism. Finally, it suggests new and strategic ways of reading otium in contemporary and future contexts, where the concept embodies an experience that fades away in the background as discrimination and the threat of destruction come to the forefront of literary discourses. In this setting, I conceptualise haunting and being haunted as ways of manifesting otium – in its absence – and as an expression that registers its absolute necessity. Expressions of haunting are also explored to decentre the overarching human of modernity and focus on the relations humans have had – and continue to have – with nature, animals, and alternate forms of consciousness. The recent turn towards the post-human, the environmental, and the ecological foregrounds further avenues of research on otium.

Spectrality can invoke central questions in conceptualising otium, particularly in its decentring of the human. If otium or idleness or leisureliness are functions of the self, reading otium as manifested in haunting directs us to the very nature of this self. The self is not necessarily “self-contained, autonomous, and with a strong sense of interiority” (Pernau 2021b: 115). Foregoing

the modern, Western, post-Enlightenment self, the self in the debates and discussions of this book is seen as subjected to alien rule, conflicted, partitioned, and fissured, but also a self that claims idle and leisurely freedom, that responds to the community and, to the ecology. This reading of otium in emotions within the self and between the self and the other opens up the space for vibrations and responses in the concept of resonance. The case for resonance has already been built in the final chapter with relations between haunting, emotions, and temporalities to recognise and address otium and its deprivation. Along with resonance and emotions, reflection requires some thought before this discussion is left (hopefully, for others to be taken up). Reflection and contemplation have already been acknowledged as central to experiences of otium, but reflection also plays a crucial role in understanding and responding to both emotions as well as the question of human thought, in effect, literary cultures. Instead of accepting that emotions are felt uniformly, the in-depth analysis in each chapter has shown the contexts and conflicts at the core of these emotions and how cultural-political contexts impact emotional attitudes towards notions of leisureliness, idleness, and indolence as entangled with the notions of freedom and selfhood. These emotional attitudes are furthermore negotiated, and at times, regulated through reflection. The literary offers the space for reflection and negotiation. If emotions are not universally felt, what can make them accessible and identifiable is reflecting upon these emotions. In the absence of otium in its reflective form, haunting emerges then as the alternate condition of reflection.

As an analytical tool, hauntology allows us to read otium as the possibility for subversion in the highly unequal society constructed around unsustainable industrialisation, traps of neo-imperialism, incessant consumption, and persistent discrimination. While otium as a lived experience/*Erlebnis* is deemed impossible in this dystopian (but real) version of society, spectrality and haunting manifest unprocessed grief and an elegiac hope for the possibility of otium. Bhattacharya's works grieve the absence of otium through social satire and spectral protagonists. Idle wandering becomes closely linked to the emotion of haunting, as caught between release and being trapped, in the story by Javed. In Basu's novel, a creative transgression for the suppressed woman musician is rendered as intertwined with her other-worldly persona of mythical, celestial singers. Intizar Husain provides literature itself, with its entanglements with the environment and non-human consciousnesses, in the form of the wandering agency of the *story*, as a respite from the unfulfillments of modern life.

The literary allows for the diverse registers of otium, idleness, and leisureliness that emerge in the context of modern South Asia but also in global contexts. In its various readings of multiple genres, multiple spatial-temporal contexts, and a multicultural and multilingual landscape, the study returns to the

opportune *space* for otium, as located within the possibility of expressions, agency, and creativity in the literary sphere. In each context, otium is read in the emotional expressions. This is observed in various contexts – colonialist critique or language elitism, genre hegemony and historicist temporality. In each conflict within the literary sphere, otium continues to manifest as the suppressed but persistent voice to be found in the emotional attitudes and registers of literary innovation. As Wajid Ali's *śauq* (leisurely pursuit) is curbed under colonialist critique in the semantics of debauchery, his emotion for loss is rendered in his heart-wrenching poetry, written in exile. For Rabindranath Tagore, the *ālasya ras*, the taste of idle leisure, is what obstructs the rhythm of his work and daily life; it is also the emotion that drives him to heights of creativity against shackles of 'civilisation', turning his idle days into the 'most productive years' of his life. In exile, feelings of dislocation and unfamiliarity, or *ajñabīyat*, allow Intizar Husain to theorise literature as the friendly ghost and the wise *betāl*, who accompanies the human and enriches his identity. The melancholic, obstinate poet in Bhattacharya's poem, although devoid of all hope, continues to write poetry for the tram, based on their shared asynchronous purposelessness.

*Yet, tram, with you  
the protest march held step;  
And sitting in your second-class carriage  
the poet of rallies  
Sang untunefully,  
songs of revolt and freedom.  
With your three eyes and rain-soaked lights you were  
the unearthly transport of lovers.*

The relevance of the literary is in allowing the space – like the tram – for emotions to flow between individuals within a community of readers and writers, as well as producers of knowledge and culture. If otium is a function of the self, then literature, as the book has argued, is entangled with the literary as a concept. And as a concept, in its relevance to language and social history (Koselleck 2016b: 60–63, 72), literature also emerges as the vehicle for experiences and emotions of otium. Emotional engagement with the literary allows reflection, a reprieve from the alienation of acceleration and discrimination, and a space for expressions of the self, in the feeling of resonance shared by literary communities.<sup>394</sup> Resonance requires a community within which strong emotions can reverberate – and this possibility of a resonating community is already embod-

---

<sup>394</sup> I draw this notion of resonance in response to literature and otium, from the works of Hartmut Rosa (2019) as relation, from Rita Felski (2020) as literary criticism, and Margrit Pernau (2021a) as transmitting emotions in a community. See also, [Chapter 6](#).

ied, for South Asian – and arguably several other global – literary cultures, in the very notion of the literary – *sāhitya* (*sahit/accompanying*) and *adab* (an etiquette, a way of living with others). Originating in the lexeme *sahita*, meaning togetherness, “accompanied or attended by”, *sāhitya* is a relationship of transaction between the *kavi* or *sāhityakār*, i.e., poet/composer and the *rasika* or reader, who responds, tastes, and enjoys (*rasa*). The transaction of the literary is achieved in the writer’s/poet’s success in communicating “emotions and ideas”, and in the response of the *rasika*, who, in his/her role of the *sahṛdaya*, “a companion of the heart”, resonates with the poet’s utterance.<sup>395</sup>

This emotional and ethical resonance between the poet/composer/visionary and the reader/receiver/follower also resounds in the concept of *adab*. An Arabic concept, *adab*, in its South Asian formulations, is read as a guideline, “on how to live correctly”; literary art and response to literary vision is an integral component of these principles of etiquette, between the *adīb* – the writer/visionary/teacher and the *muṭāla‘a* – the reader, the one who pursues, and contemplates. This transactional relation of the literary and the spiritual realm is reflected in both the *ustād-sāgird* (in literary, musical, and other creative knowledge systems) and the *pīr-murīd* (pertaining to spiritual knowledge) Ṣūfī traditions. Therefore, *adab* (in its literary meaning) is also a concept of resonance, “between inner and outer modes of being and between the individual and social”.<sup>396</sup> The sociality of the literary has been addressed in this study through a reading of contextualised literary communities and their emotional collectiveness. *Āḍḍā*, *naśist*, *maḥfil*, *majlis*, *muśā‘irah* – are all expressions of sociality of the literary; located in histories of literature and leisure, these formulations of collectives can only function through emotional relations – like remembrance and nostalgia/*yād*, love and longing/*māyā*, aimless vagabondage/*āvārgī*, melancholic grief/*udāsi/biṣād* and familiar civility/*bhadratā*, among others. The literary is thus seen to formulate a sense of community, in which emotions of otium can resonate. These literary communities can resonate and include the underprivileged, the other, and the non-human. Understanding otium as intertwined with the literary in its transgressive creativity and resonance within and

<sup>395</sup> For etymology of *sāhitya*, see Monier Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary (1899) p. 1212. <https://www.sanskrit-lexicon.uni-koeln.de/scans/csl-apidev/servepdf.php?dict=MW&page=1212> accessed on 13<sup>th</sup> February 2022.

See also, K. Krishnamoorthy, “The Meaning of ‘Sahitya’: A Study in Semantics” (1985), 66. See also Vinay Dharwadker, “Sahitya”, *Key Concepts in Modern India Studies* (2015), 237–39. The significance of “*hita*” remains conflicted in both studies, but more significantly, the notion of “association” in the semantic concept is undebatable.

<sup>396</sup> Edward Simpson & Farhana Ibrahim, “Adab”, *Key Concepts in Modern Indian Studies* (2015), 1–2.



between individuals and communities can enable us to think of literature, emotions, and otium in innovative ways and reconciliatory impulses. Literature and the literary, as spheres of playful creativity, conceptualising the self, and resonating sociality, thus enable otium to manifest itself globally, within identifiable and reverberating emotions across cultures and communities – also, in future possibilities, in aimless wanderings, in enchanted wonderments, in requiems, reminiscences, hopes and longings – in idle and leisurely feelings.

Space is therefore a significant aspect, for resonance to reverberate, for the literary sphere, and for any possibility of otium to be expressed and experienced. This abstract understanding of space is not just a trope but a persistent aspect – in its very intricate links with lexemes and ideas of leisureliness itself – the space-time to do something otiose, returning to the Bengali *avakās*, the Urdu *furṣat* – has to be understood in concrete terms of the space we – i.e., embodiments of the self – inhabit. The possibility of future leisureliness and otium is dependent on the accessibility of this concrete, real space, as already highlighted by Nabarun Bhattacharya's oppressed, spectral, flying humans. If otium is not to be collapsed into topics of consumption and narratives of 'the good life', then the future of otium/leisure studies has to concretely engage with ecological concerns that formulate much of the self as it contains the self. Herein persists a resounding resonance for research on the topic in a global framework, as earth's ecology is the animate, alive agent and the transforming space we all inhabit, in diverse modes of being, feeling, and (not) doing. Otium, a function of the self, must also be seen in response to the space that the self inhabits and affects. The present study, emerging from histories of the so-called global south, has demonstrated the need to question that self-contained self. For future researchers, the task is to take up these pressing challenges, as our concepts of being, feeling, and (not) doing require deliberations and reorientations for the future of individual, communitarian, and ecological selfhood.

