

Resisting the Event:
Aesthetics of the Non-Event in the
Contemporary South Asian Novel
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Abstract: This essay interrogates the ways in which contemporary fiction from the subcontinent responds to the preoccupation with the spectacular event in Western philosophy, historiography, and popular media discourse. Today, this seemingly unanimous and all-pervasive fixation with colossal moments—revolutionary, politically progressive, or apocalyptic, terroristic ones—grips our collective global imaginary like never before. The collapse of the twin towers and the post-9/11 context of the war on terror have produced dominant discourses that accept, willy-nilly, the cloying power of event-centric narratives. In this context I study Vikram Chandra’s *Sacred Games*, Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, and Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* to suggest that contemporary literary experimentation emerging from South Asia proactively resists the catastrophic event’s magnetic power to create an inescapable force field that keeps everything constantly aligned in relation to it.

Keywords: event, 9/11, war on terror, subaltern studies, mourning

This essay interrogates the way in which modernity’s history is mapped and formally structured via a certain shaping macro-trope—that of the cataclysmic, all-determining event. In modernity’s self-narrative, the event is suffused by an economy of excess in which the individual specific moment comes to exceed its local possibilities so as to take its grandstand place as that one nominal referent around and through which our age might define itself comprehensively. It is, after all, moder-

nity's entanglement with the event that makes possible, for instance, the declaration that we live in a post-9/11 world. In this sense, the surplus values of the event derive from its daedal position as an imagined, or claimed, cause of causes.

I begin, in section one, by theorizing the event as it is encapsulated in Western philosophy, and consider some of the discursive-political implications of what I call modernity's "event fetishism." In section two I examine the principles of Subaltern Studies historiography that actively challenge traditional, hegemonic forms of history writing that are oriented around and navigated through dramatic moments. Next, I suggest that contemporary literary experimentation emerging from South Asia moves the Subaltern Studies project forward by proactively resisting the event's magnetic power to create an inescapable force field that keeps everything constantly aligned in relation to it. Finally, I undertake a detailed analysis of three novels—Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games* (2006), Arundhati Roy's *The God Of Small Things* (1997), and Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007)—to explicate the intricate manoeuvres by which they execute their radical critiques of "eventalism."

I. Theorizing the Event

What is an event and how do we define it? Francoise Dastur conceives of the event in two primary ways: first, the event is that which "arrives unexpectedly" and strikes "without warning" (182), as in the case of a true surprise or an accident. It is thus divorced from the familiar and the mundane. At the same time, the event not only parts from the well-known and recognisable but marks a radical break in the predictable and imaginable: it is the "excess to expectation" (Dastur 183) or an internal contradiction. It is the "impossible which happens in spite of everything" (183). The event, then, is fundamentally characterised by the "unpredictability of what might just as well not have occurred" (Bensaïd). Concomitantly, therefore, this radical disruption plays out in the dimension of time. The event ruptures temporality and "dislocates time"; it "puts the flow of time out of joint" and divides the world into a before and after, a past and an "unanticipated future" (Dastur 182). It is non-integrative and hence "does not happen in a world—it is, on the

contrary, as if a new world opens up through its happening” (182). In a similarly apocalyptic vein, David Simpson suggests that a catastrophic event is experienced as one that ruptures “the deep rhythms of cultural time,” thus in effect erasing time, making all that came before it redundant, and threatening a “monstrous future” (4).

For French philosopher Alain Badiou, whose complex and extensive theorisation of the concept has received considerable attention, the event is “purely hazardous, and cannot be inferred from the situation” (*Being and Event* 193). This does not mean, clarifies Quentin Meillassoux, that the event implies the creation of something altogether new out of nothing. Rather, the event is the intense manifestation of something that was already there, but its existence and appearance has been “profoundly denied by the situation” preceding the event (8). Moreover, the event gives birth not just to a number of discrete facts, but to the event itself—a new appellation or something that monumentally exceeds the sum total of easily classifiable and comprehensible isolated facts.

According to Bensaïd the event can be anything: Christ’s resurrection; the storming of the Bastille; the October Revolution; illegal immigrant workers taking to the streets in order to break out of their status as clandestine victims and become agents in their own right; the unemployed stepping out from the ranks of statistics to become subjects of resistance; the sick refusing to resign themselves to being mere patients and attempting to think and act their own illness (3). The condition necessary for an occurrence to attain the status of an event is its “transformational character” or inauguration of a new mode of “being-in-the-world” (Oliver). It must provoke a “portal or gateway to future possibilities” (Oliver). Finally, the event produces subjects, not vice versa: “[T]he subject is formed as a response to the event, and does not precede it” (Sayeau 23). In acting with fidelity to the truth that is forwarded as emerging from the event, the subjects are constituted as political agents.

Badiou is hardly alone in theorizing the event; in fact, philosophy has articulated an “evental turn” (Sayeau), or a preoccupation with occurrences that feature as radical alterations of the status quo. Such a conceptual turn seems not the least bit surprising if one takes into account

how crucial the event has been to the West's philosophy and historiography. As Michael Sayeau demonstrates in his introduction to *Against the Event: The Everyday and Evolution of Modernist Narrative*, Western thought from Kant to Heidegger and Deleuze to Derrida has given rise to a "metaphysics of the event" (5). While their approaches differ—Badiou, for instance, critiques Deleuze's idea of the event in "The Event in Deleuze,"¹ and Derrida deconstructs the idea of the singularity of the event and argues that it is "haunted both by the past precedent and by the anticipation of the future," so that repeatability and non-originality, rather than uniqueness, mark the movement of history (Sayeau 26)—they have expended a heavy artillery of conceptual resources in decoding the nature of the event.

Despite their internal differences, however, such Western philosophical theorisations tend to sanction totalisation, or all or nothing conceptions that accord a truly mythological status to the event, so much so that it transfigures into a capitalised version of itself: "The Event." From the perspective of totalisation, The Event assumes a nearly epochal authority as a climactic turning point that changes, in a permanent and indelible way, the terms in which history is understood and written. It is in a global context of deciphering, purposing, and repurposing that one understands the full burden of meaning when, for example, Thomas Friedman refers to 9/11 as a "hole in the fabric of civilization" (qtd. in Simpson 6).

The impetus of totalising macro-narratives centred on a defining central event is one that, historically and discursively, has repeatedly helped sustain and legitimise the modern West's conception of itself, particularly in terms of its relationship to the rest of the world. The event receives its authority from the actualities of a world and geopolitical configuration in which power and development are distributed asymmetrically. Consequently, the one-way direction of global hegemony helps contour, in a more or less tendentious and loaded manner, the seismic impact of the event as enshrined in image, commentary, and definitions. Thanks to the West's and particularly America's pre-eminent metropolitan location at the commanding centre of global arrangements of military-industrial dominance, wealth concentration, and cultural influence, the

rest of the world, including that part of it located at the power-denuded periphery of transnational networks must either accept and cooperate with official narratives, or wait to be forcibly coerced into submitting to the conceptual schema of the central event as sanctioned by dominant Occidental narratives.

The present-day world may be viewed as one gripped by event-mania, a world that gives expression to what Susan Sontag and Mick Broderick, in their discussions of Hollywood productions, describe respectively as “imagination of disaster” (209) and “apocalyptic desire” (267). The contemporary world order’s capacity to morph real world events into grandiose and spectacular visual-cinematic treats and “flat screen [phenomena] that [are] repetitively seen” but “cannot be ‘imagined’” (Simpson 16) has rendered the dividing line between the cultural consumption of fiction (e.g., disaster movies and science fiction fiascos) and real world cataclysms somewhat blurry and precarious. Thus when Sontag suggests that disasters in science fiction films articulate collective cultural fantasies that enable our world to survive the “continual threat of . . . unremitting banality and inconceivable terror” (224), we might be justified in asking if event-manufacturing helps serve a comparable end. Viewed in this light, the event simultaneously offers an escape from the “unbearably humdrum” (Sontag 225) as well as a pre-emptive shock absorber against the trauma of future tragedies. Surviving one event seems contrariwise to neutralise its threat, embolden the sufferers, and furnish an incentive to energetically pursue and perpetrate an endless line of “return disasters” which ensure that the event, in a sense, has an inextinguishable life. Ironically, then, surviving Armageddon becomes the enabling condition for unleashing open-ended retaliatory wars against zones and places that event-discourse has pre-identified as benighted, dangerous destinations deserving of intervention. Put simply, the event, by its sheer foundationalism, constitutes inarguable grounds for unlimited intervention initiatives in other, non-metropolitan (peripheral) zones of the world.

Simpson masterfully unpacks the “the culture of commemoration” that overtakes societies in the aftermath of a truly catastrophic event. The phase of initial mourning and melancholy, he suggests, forms the

enabling prelude to a successive state of emergency, as the state steps forward to take charge during a time of trauma (Simpson 4). Using 9/11 as his touchstone illustration, Simpson reveals the way in which memorialising and honouring the victims of the tragedy harbours, and goes hand in hand with, a call for retributive vendetta. Restitution, in this case, takes the form of the indiscriminate dispersal and discharging of one's grief onto others who often are not the specific perpetrators but serve as ersatz perpetrator-substitutes. The impossibility of coming to terms with an event is quickly overtaken by a new lexicon that immediately dominates the global media and public imagination. Even the simple emergence of the abbreviation "9/11" produces a shorthand of terse pithiness but boundless evocative power and becomes a supremely efficient means by which the event can, with the utterance of the magic number, be made to loom large and terrifying, infecting everything, without an end in sight. Consequently, the date remains "an open designation":

At one moment these numbers will be a sign of remembering the dead, at another the mandate for military adventurism, at yet another, an architectural and civic opportunity. The slimmed-down economy of this signifier can draw to itself, with minimum resistance, almost anything that comes its way and anything that is sent in its direction. (Simpson 16)

The absence of a year suffixing the date (the abbreviation does not contain a reference to 2001) ensures that the date can extend limitlessly through history, backwards and forwards, colouring everything.

II. The Postcolonial Context

It is interesting and somewhat ironic that the dominant historiographic models that gained prominence during the latter half of the twentieth century in the newly liberated ex-colonies that form the so-called Third World tended (as in the case of the West-centric exaltation of events) to instate forms of history writing that remained remarkably fixated on grand moments and larger than life personages. As a result, the memorialisation of previous sign-posts in the history of national liberation

struggles based on ideas of primacy and definitionism—the “first” war of independence, spectacular massacres by apparatuses of the colonial state, first presidents and prime ministers, “fathers of the nation”—continued to inspire and provide an exegetical template for the narratives of self-emergence that found acceptance and endorsement in these post-colonies. In such a process, the place of eminence belonging to the event or the towering leader of the newly freed nation is surrounded with an effulgent glow and aura such that certain moments and people assume a position of supreme and inarguable reference, while others fall by the wayside and are effectively left out of the account.

The point made above is clarified by a brief contrastive consideration of what the Subaltern School’s distinctive and counter-evental intervention in Indian history writing tried to achieve, against the grain. The Subaltern Studies Group emerged relatively late on the social sciences scene in modern Indian history writing, against the backdrop of post-modern theorising and its restoration of the marginal to centrality as well as the political ferment of the 1980s that included an awareness of the unofficial resistances spreading through Latin America. In terms of its analytic approach, this new trend in Indian historiography took its epistemological cue from the *Annales* School in France and George Rudé’s studies of revolutionary crowds, grassroots insurrections, and the so-called “histories from below.”

The Subaltern Studies Group staged a political break from colonial and elite nationalist historiographic frameworks that were used to chronicle India’s freedom movement in favour of “voices from the edge” (Pandey 223) that disturbed the centre. “The ordinary apparatus of historiography,” writes Ranajit Guha, is “[d]esigned for big events and institutions” and typically turns the full spotlight exclusively or at least predominantly on “those larger phenomena which visibly stick out of the debris of the past” (138). As a result this tradition of history writing “tends to ignore the small drama and fine detail of social existence, especially at its lower depths” (Guha 138). The Subaltern Studies scholars, by contrast and reactively, (re)directed their gaze to the invisible “small drama” of a “dismembered past” (Guha 139), thus relativizing to a more realistic scale and size the significance of the supposedly defining “big

events” that are typically narrativised and broadcast in epical terms by mainstream historiography, with all the accompanying implications of universal, cohesive, and glorifying claims about the Indian nation and the great figures who made it.

This non-epical remapping of Indian historiography entailed not only a reclaiming of unlikely, and thus far ignored, agents and sites of history—insurrectionist peasants, lower-class women (subalterns mostly bypassed in dominant narratives), rumours, gossip, overlooked documents, and “untamed fragments” (Guha 139)—but also a programme for re-temporalising history such that “the moment(s) of change be pluralised” (Spivak 3). What is thus achieved is a radical reconfiguring and dispersal of mainstream historiography’s automatic assumptions about which events should be taken as definitional for a nation’s or class’s self-fashioning narrative. Subaltern Studies overturns the colonialist and nationalist history’s chronological markers—cataclysmic events, violent, totalizing disruptions, the traditional touchstones of “history happening”—and recuperates what Sumit Sarkar calls the “exceptional-normal” (308). The everyday or quotidian is gleaned for its mesmeric brilliance and novelty. It is no longer the singular event but daily quasi-events that are enthroned as worthy of the historian’s analysis.

Taking my cue from the methodological opening signalled by the Subaltern break, I argue that, in a number of cases, contemporary fictions emerging from South Asia (and the diasporas thereof) carry forward in literary-fictionalising mode the conceptual implications of this revisionary impulse with its call to “pluralise” and thus diminish the presumed authority of the central event. Indeed, this essay argues that these novels extend the boundaries of the Subaltern Studies logic of reversal whereby the events relegated to the background in hegemonic historiography are foregrounded and actively undo eventfulness altogether. Similar to the Subaltern Studies group, they experiment with the peripheral and the small, but instead of creating an alternative history of previously sidelined events, novels by writers such as Chandra, Roy, and Hamid elect, almost counter-intuitively, to fashion literary narratives out of non-events. The results are nothing short of surprising: authorised, event-centric discourses, whether originating in South Asia or

from the West, are consciously jettisoned or bracketed in these fictional narratives. In particular, the texts radically challenge the mania for an epiphanic, all-revealing, transformational key episode as the structural basis of a fiction's textual logic. The way is then cleared for a strategically loose, counter-discursive fictional structure.

Among the most interesting and value-laden sub-features of such strategic looseness is that it makes for a new, de-formalised economy of time, pace, causality management, and denouement resolution within the novel's structure. In the counter-discursive examples of South Asian/diasporic writing under consideration, one finds a purposeful dissolution of tight organisation in favour of an uncoerced sequencing of events that relinquishes the race toward an inexorable disaster or the "key moment," and instead crawls, ambles, or meanders slowly and perhaps painfully, and certainly more tentatively, toward some distinctly less than "final" solution, at times even a literal "non-event."

Even when such texts depict a catastrophe, it is deliberately decentred; the novels refuse to accord it centre stage or absolute finality and instead choose to culminate with a non-spectacular coda. Despite being charged with pathos, these endings lack the fervour and hypnotic power of the "crowning event" in the kind of apocalyptic connotations described earlier and make it difficult to recuperate and harness the "event" in question for hyperbolic or jingoistic purposes. Such a re-reading of these texts, as in Foucault's genealogy, seeks the vibrancy of life in unpromising spaces and things we think of as being without history: "in sentiments, love, conscience, instincts" (Foucault 139). It laughs at pomposity of the discourse of origins which sets store by the cataclysmic/overwhelming/terroristic event as a launching pad for a new world, whether dystopian or utopian.

III. Terrorism as Non-Event: Ambling Temporality in Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games*

Chandra's nearly one-thousand-page novel *Sacred Games* adopts an oblique and thus decentring narrative strategy that incorporates the standard protocols of the detective genre, but in a way that ultimately subverts and deconstructs them. For example, contrary to the sensa-

tionalist “thriller” representations of police work generically favoured by blockbuster films as crime detection and crisis/event-management, the novel systematically deglamourises the actual hunting down of criminals. *Sacred Games* painstakingly demonstrates that the field duties of the cop are not “car chases, sprints through crowded streets, motion and movement and pounding background music” (Chandra 212). Much more commonly (and unromantically), they entail low-down sordid activities like intimidating the elderly in their homes and “disrupting family life and business until the informant s[i]ng[s], the criminal cave[s], the innocent confesse[s]” (212). Similarly, contrary to the tight-knit, suspense-centric plot of the classic detective novel, episodes do not neatly follow a schedule of events and discoveries until a case is resolved. Solving cases can take months or even years of desultory, aleatory, and directionless drifting before a situation becomes clear, or come close to closure or resolution. Meanwhile, the actual unfolding of the chase is seldom as dramatic as chase scenes in Hollywood films: it is unsteady wandering, and hit-and-miss. It may take a lifetime for the real meaning behind a “symptom” to become manifest.

In *Sacred Games*, for instance, seemingly unconnected, insignificant, and unglamorous facts are linked. The gentle solitariness of Sartaj’s elderly mother, her progressive withdrawal from the activities of everyday life, and the inchoate mumblings of Pakistani spy Shahid Khan’s comatose mother become subtly pregnant indicators of a shared history of disorienting trauma that these outwardly unconnected women once endured. To be sure, there is nothing concrete in the novel that overtly associates the tales of these old women; one lives her slow-paced life in the Indian town of Puna in the state of Maharashtra, while the other inches toward her death in her son’s home in the United States. Most divisively of all, they belong to ostensibly antagonist religious communities and nations. On the face of it, then, there is little to suggest consanguinity or any intimacy of a significant kind.

Oblique details, however, may disclose a hidden, muted connection. Toward the end of the novel the barest hint of unimagined solidarity is established between the women. The reader detects a hazy sensation that they once knew each other and were sisters in the pre-Partition world.

The old women's stony silence about Partition and the fact that neither of their sons knows his mother's history act as meaningful clues. The silence does not stop readers from recognising the nearly invisible chain of connectors that tie together and involve the characters in a subdued tragedy. An event-centred discourse, however, that more often than not clamours for loud, obvious, instantaneous connections and hyper-apparent linkages, would overlook these subtle nexuses. The reader, coerced by Chandra to focus on the minutiae of geriatric lives, is wrenched away from the grand narratives of international, subcontinental espionage and is instead compelled to observe the silences of old age rather than the din that surrounds monumental events.

Paradoxically, it is crucial to realise that the "revelation" that the two women were once members of the same family, although mysteriously dramatic and even sensational, serves no functional purpose in the detective plot. In fact, none of the protagonists arrive at the disclosure in question or even cross paths in a way that might cause the issue to become an active concern for any of the cast of players. Yet the secret of broken families and traumatised teenage years that haunts these seemingly unconnected women in their old age and the unspoken pact of silence that seals off from mention the harrowing experiences of Partition that made them who they are carry more weight in the novel than any classified "top secret" information that the Pakistani spy or Sikh-Indian detective can hope to unearth in the routine pursuit of their tedious and lacklustre assignments.

Indeed, the detective's tactics of investigation are revealed as hopelessly incompetent when it comes to deciphering the coded pasts of persons elemental to his personal life. They are also rarely successful in producing information of practical utility or dramatic consequence in the professional sphere of inter-nation espionage. As a matter of fact, the only "case" Sartaj ever really strikes unequivocal gold with is a humdrum affair involving a young pilot who is blackmailing his ex-lover, a flight attendant and married woman, with photographs of their illicit rendezvous, for the sake of a few quick bucks—sordid stuff, surely, on a petty private scale, but hardly a matter of national import or earth-shaking significance; certainly nothing that events are made of. The paucity of

any novelty or significant moral or political dimensions to this mundane exposure again leaves Sartaj (and the reader) with an unsettling residue of discomfort and disappointment. The pettifogging chicanery of modern urban existence as well as that of sleuths, snoops, and dirty operators decimates our hopes for grand epical plots and glorious moral-ethical victors and victories. The drab and clichéd character of the mystery that consumes so much of Sartaj's time and energy leaves us hankering for something that might be a trifle less banal and tediously predictable.

When at last a “big” case finally comes along, Sartaj, a quietly corrupt yet oddly compassionate and conscientious police officer, finds himself unexpectedly and intriguingly enmeshed in a grand plot outside the plot—a massive terrorist conspiracy that threatens to reduce the city of Bombay (now Mumbai) to nuclear waste. Yet as he struggles to fathom the mysterious links between local underworld don Ganesh Gaitonde's suicide and the major terrorist threat, Sartaj is continually assailed by the realisation that in a world of radical chaos and confusion—one quite different in this respect from the neat causal logic and clarity of standard spy and “whodunnit” fictions as well as event-centred paradigms—there is no way for him to work through the enigma to full clarification. There are no clues he can follow to put together the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle.

In fact, the aimlessness of real-life detection becomes an ominous weight in the novel. Thus, visits to the morgue, or seeing the dead bodies of Ganesh and Jojo, the woman found with him, prove a futile and anticlimactic dead end with nothing revealed or understood: “What had he learnt? Sartaj had no idea. It had all been a waste of time” (95). When he visits Jojo's sister Mary to see what light she might be able shed on her sister's seedy life, he once again finds little to help him make headway in the case. Instead, with the investigation foundering and sidelined, he finds himself digressing into a proto-romantic involvement with Mary.

Ultimately, we learn details of the terrorist threat not from Sartaj's floundering investigation, but from Gaitonde's confession. Even from beyond the grave, Gaitonde insists on providing his history and baring the detailed trajectory of his involvement with the terrorist plot. That it takes a dead gangster to put a disastrous event into some sort of factual

perspective makes a surreal mockery out of the police and readers' attempts at solving the mystery and fully grasping opaque catastrophes on a plane of rational logic. Not even the omniscient narrator, who intermittently controls the tale for half the novel,² can venture any guesses about who is behind the terrorist threat or when it will be carried out. In this text, mastery—that great desideratum of event-centric detective literature³—seems a far cry from the realm of the possible.

In the novel the disaster is averted, but not before our expectations of what a worthy climax ought to be have been comprehensively demolished. Significantly, in violation of every stereotypical expectation as well as prevailing socio-cultural presumptions about “the usual suspects” who “perpetrate” events in the current global context, we discover that the attack is not masterminded by a Muslim terrorist organisation but (in a bizarre twist of logical illogic) a Hindu fundamentalist looking to instigate nuclear war between India and Pakistan. This “misfit” primary fact—one that defies the standard rational logic of the event-centric discourse of 9/11—is enough to challenge not just the reader's structure of predictions and beliefs, but also more subversively and disorientingly, the paradoxical security embedded in the logic of 9/11. Every time we find ourselves in the midst of another catastrophic event, fear of Islamic “terrorists” enables us to swiftly dispel the incomprehensibility of the crisis and make everything explicable by automatically flash-connecting violence, bombs, and terrorist threats with fanatical Muslims. This ideology, shared by right-wing administrations in India and North America, is meant to make an occurrence that resists post-9/11 logic immediately legible.

Additionally, *Sacred Games*' culmination in a cop-out “non-event” forces us to question the imagination of disaster that both provokes and promotes event-fetishism. Sontag's phrase, “imagination of disaster,” usefully sums up our perverse contemporary preoccupation with the side of things that causes them to hurtle inexorably toward catastrophes—a radically apprehensive expectancy that has held the popular-cultural imagination of the twenty-first century in its grip. Contrariwise, instead of a doomsday-scale “big bang” that answers the hungry need of an imagination of disaster, Chandra's novel concludes inconclusively,

anticlimactically, with “a series of pops, and then another, phap-phap-phap. . . . And then a last little boom. . . . So with those little banging sounds far away, apparently the world had been saved” (876–77). Such innocuous avoidance of slated disaster is redolent of T. S. Eliot’s sense of the vacuity and anomie of modern catastrophe that concludes “The Hollow Men”: “This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper” (lines 97–98).

However, the novel does not naïvely or altogether decry the legitimacy of anxiety or fear. In the aftermath of averting the disaster Sartaj “didn’t feel any safer. Inside him, even now, there was that burning fuse, that ticking fear. . . . Our team won. Sure. . . . But Sartaj couldn’t keep the question at bay. You want to save *this*? For what? Why?” (876; emphasis in original). Sartaj’s dour state of mind in a moment when many would think a feeling of accomplishment and honour would be proper, well deserved, and legitimate, seems amiss. Post-evental scenarios in which catastrophes have been surmounted are, as Simpson suggests, usually occasions for insidiously jingoistic celebrations of national pride and the homeland’s tenacity. In this context, Sartaj’s refusal to participate in navel-gazing, self-congratulatory revelry is not a sign of cynical or misanthropic pessimism. Rather, his peripheral encounters, which he accumulates while trudging aimlessly across the length and breadth of the city, entering slums and seeing the conditions of life for migrant labourers, confronting dire poverty, juvenile beggars, and survivors of riots and the state’s bureaucratic espionage machinery—an unstructured and unglamorous reality, light years away from the neat simplicity of a “cops versus terrorists” or “big bang” paradigm—force him to acknowledge that there are more pressing, ethically compelling reasons for living in apprehension than an officially-sanctioned xenophobic paranoia. The heart of the novel lies with the unromantic discovery of the conditions of life lived out in all its humdrum, uneventful tedium, drudgery, and wretchedness, rather than the megalomaniacal fantasies of those who wish to destroy the nation in a grand flash or the grandiose and paranoid zeal of self-appointed messianic saviours out to defend the world, and by extension, the status quo’s structures of repression that Sartaj discovers along his zig-zag way down investigation road.

As a result, the novel's studiously non-propulsive pace eschews the crime thriller genre's pressing "desire for a drive toward the solution," a drive that the text purposively dissipates via a "countermovement against it" (Martin 169). The novel presents an escalation of expectations, which when "satisfied (the total destruction of the earth prevented), simply reproduces" the desire once again (169). Theodore Martin suggests that although *Sacred Games* deliberately lets down our "teleological expectations" (169), by opting out of a narrative structure dependent on an all-solving climax it encourages a different emphasis on reading the text's middle. Consequently our focus shifts from the novel's "endtime" to a crucially "meantime" structural consciousness (170). The endless wait to which the reader and the protagonist are subjected, during which "not much happens" and wherein a secret does not produce a weighty "corresponding revelation" (176), causes readers to undergo the intense experience of what Martin terms "drawn out time" (175), but might just as usefully be thought of as lived-time, as distinct from an artificially-heightened sensitivity to crisis time. Lived-time is mellow, plodding, and un-*event*-ful but nonetheless substantive, layered, contradictory, and endlessly rich in possibilities. Crisis time, or time wrapped up in the event, is by contrast hectic, urgent, and obsessively rectilinear in its hurtling progress to disaster. It also leads to reckless, anticipative suicide and murder (convinced that the world is headed for catastrophe Ganesh kills his friend Jojo and takes his own life), generates pre-emptive paranoia, and represents the end of possibilities. In a kind of insane twist of diabolic humour, the imagination of disaster breeds real-time disaster.

IV. Destabilising Evental Origins: "Narratives of Connection" in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

Another richly suggestive subcontinental exemplar of the event-subverting potential of this fictional counter-discourse is Roy's Booker Prize-winning novel *The God of Small Things*. Roy's work, in its structure as well as its informing idea and spirit, challenges our naïve dependency on the causal authority of a monological master-event. The novel defies the search for that comprehensive, explanatory textual moment that lends thrust, meaning, and purpose to the whole narrative. Instead, Roy

destabilizes the master-event by critically pluralising the event. What results is a random assortment of microbial mini-events that lead up more or less accidentally and randomly (and thus in fact do *not* “lead up”) to the catastrophic finale: Velutha’s murder at the hands of the police in the fictional town of Ayemenem, located in the southern Indian state of Kerala.

The novel’s free-flowing diachronic form in which each successive chapter shifts gears, changes direction, and constantly pendulates, weaving a non-linear, non-causal account that prevents the reader from hastening to easy, simplistic conclusions about the exact relationship between an event and its cause. While Badiou’s theorization suggests that the event erupts out of nowhere, as an inexplicable, unforeseeable occurrence, normative media discourse frames the event as emanating from a perfectly discernible and decipherable set of causes. Roy, however, rebuffs the tendency of official accounts to confidently demarcate legitimate causes from allegedly irrelevant ones in the making of the event. The novel’s nuanced approach to shattered causality that culminates in the correspondingly broken body of Velutha in a prison cell makes it impossible for us to pare down the reasons for his death to any straightforward, neatly unified single-source factors .

The novel instead writes events into the intricate morphology of a web, a narrative structure replete with discontinuous, misfit moments that conspire to undo Velutha’s threatening sexual-caste ascendancy. Nothing and anything in this crisscrossed maze of events, in effect, could have been *the* trigger that sets off a series of chain reactions ending with deterministic necessity, in Velutha’s death. When precisely is Velutha’s fate sealed, then? When Ammu first notices Velutha playing with her son and begins to desire him? When he waves a red flag at a political demonstration? Or is it that Baby Kochamma perceives Velutha’s politicisation as a personal affront and plots her vendetta against him? Is Velutha’s downfall an outcome of the Communist Party’s seamy underbelly? Its local leader, Mr. Pillai, much like Pontius Pilot, washes his hands of the matter and shrinks from protecting Velutha because sticking one’s neck out for a lower-caste man does not seem worth the trouble to him. Everything and nothing possess definitive causal author-

ity. The near-impossibility of ascertaining with any degree of assurance the “true origin” of the novel’s intractable master-event, Velutha’s death, discombobulates our confidence in rational explanations that claim a mastery of history’s movement, usually by reference to an “event” that lies behind or ahead of it all.

Aarthi Vadde writes that Roy’s “narratives of connection are weapons against the bedfellows of global capitalism and state control” (522). I extend her argument a step further and suggest that by giving us any number of factors that insidiously co-conspire the unfolding of a man’s fate, these “narratives of connection” paradoxically dislodge any possibility of conceptualising events in cogent, causal terms. In this way, instead of providing a reliable narrative that recounts the all-explaining official collective memory of the powerful, Roy offers a dispersed genealogy, a re-serialised “counter-memory composed of the same elements repeated and arranged in a different manner” that, as a result, “precludes a singular, specific solution” (Colwell).

There are two additional means by which Roy mounts her quiet assault on the authority of the event. First, the non-anthropomorphic lens privileged by the narratorial voice decentres what Vadde calls the “epistemologies of ascendancy” (529). Such epistemologies, argues Vadde, stem from humans’ desire to dominate others, and specifically from their grandiose wish to understand the world exclusively in relation to their species-standpoint. Roy, by contrast, establishes linkages not just between and amongst events ranged laterally and alongside one another on a levelling field that effectively equalises them in value and importance (and thus robs them of the event-centric positing of a magisterial commanding grand event) but also across different species—humans and spiders, for instance—and between different peoples and places. The resultant textuality-of-interrelationship compels the reader to acknowledge and personally experience, for example, the tragedy of a single drowned child with no less force, compassion, or empathy than the “ecological destruction of a rural village turned international tourist destination” (Vadde 524). Likewise, the upturning of a boat with children in it amounts to more than a passing news item statistic about the human casualties. As Vadde reminds us, “Roy quickly turns the reader’s

attention from human disappointment to the shipwreck's impact on its nonhuman passengers" (535). When the boat with the children in it topples over,

[a] white boat-spider floated up with the river in the boat, struggled briefly and drowned. Her white egg sac ruptured prematurely, and a hundred baby spiders (too light to drown, too small to swim) stippled the smooth surface of the green water, before being swept out to sea. To Madagascar, to start a new phylum of Malayali Swimming Spiders. (Roy 195)

The novel's capacity to dialogise human events by crisscrossing them with ecological references and inter-species perceptions re-forges our inveterate response to events. Our standard response-mode, dominated by a narcissistic species-referentiality with its presumptuous hypervalorization of human experience and the human species, is dramatically undercut. An event, we must concede in light of the novel's unconventionally inclusive spread of sympathy, has a bearing on more than just the most powerful and dangerous species on earth. We are instead nudged toward a new "ecological collectivity" (Vadde 535) in which we recognise ourselves as critically thinking social beings, not just in a self-absorbed narcissistic relation to the human race, but all-embracingly, in relation to the "land [we] inhabit" (529).

That Roy resuscitates and completes the nocturnal love scene between Velutha and Ammu at the novel's close and ends with the promise of "tomorrow" exchanged between them represents a deliberate reframing that realigns the power of the event in terms of linear causality. The reader knows that "tomorrow" will never come—that Velutha will die tomorrow—and that there is no future for those who break the "love laws." This knowledge only makes the lovers' parting more poignant:

She kissed his closed eyes and stood up. Velutha with his back against the mangosteen tree watched her walk away.

She had a dry rose in her hair.

She turned to say it once again: "*Naaley*."

Tomorrow. (Roy 321)

By ending with the fantasy of a future reunion Roy emphasizes the failure of tomorrow. She also thereby encourages us to envision and desire a better tomorrow, in which Velutha and Ammu could hopefully keep their promise. The moment in which the lovers bid each other goodbye thus evokes a narrative aesthetic that Michael Bernstein calls “sideshadowing” (1): a way of highlighting unfulfilled, unrealised possibilities as well as countervailing forces of the past that disrupt the forward march of a unidirectional view of history. Master-schemes impoverish and demean the present moment, dense with possibilities of what might have come but did not. Sideshadowing refuses the tyranny of master-schemes and instead foregrounds and actualises the many unrealised potentialities of the world.

Additionally, by disrupting linear time and concluding the novel with the lovers’ nighttime rendezvous rather than Velutha’s death and his inert, neutralized dead body, Roy compels her readers to acknowledge and appreciate him as a sentient being. We are encouraged to value his personhood at the peak of his robustness rather than to reduce his ontological significance to his terrible end. As Bernstein demonstrates, post-apocalyptic narratives attribute import only to lives destroyed by catastrophe. Roy leaves us with the image of a man who is more than alive: a pulsating, loving man, who is remembered not because he dies, but because he lives a little “too much.”

In the end, *The God of Small Things*, with its inventive free-play on time and circumstance and strategic focus on small things, makes us acutely sensitised to the radical potential latent in the everydayness of the non-event of two lovers meeting in the hush and secrecy of night. By refusing to end the novel with the cataclysmic event of Velutha’s murder—a moment that will, as event-theorists may well argue, inexorably alter everything—and instead bringing it to a close with the mundanity of a romantic promise, Roy destabilizes our certitudes of how things will turn out. Both the forces of social conservatism (in abeyance for the moment when the world sleeps), and the spectacular event of Velutha’s death, thus play second fiddle to the ordinariness and silent power of two people making love on the banks of a beautiful river, surrounded by the screen of verdant foliage that keeps their tryst a secret. The emo-

tive force of *The God of Small Things* lies in the idea that the novel is not contained or exhausted by the domineering mastery of the event. Instead, the narrative registers the event as just one actualisation among the many possible: “What is real . . . is a subset of the possible. . . . The virtual can yield a practically unlimited diversity of actualizations” (Colwell). Roy activates hope (which we might imagine as the starting point of possibility) for the undoing of a repressive order in favour of a counter-actualization that shakes the taboos and proscriptions of cruelly blinkered clan law.

V. Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and the Ethic of Impressions

Unlike the other novels discussed in this essay, Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* explicitly engages with what Jean Baudrillard identifies as the “‘mother’ of all events” (4) that inaugurated the twenty-first century, 9/11 and the collapse of the twin towers. Peter Morey convincingly argues that Hamid’s novel undertakes “a sly intervention that destabilizes the dominant categories of the post-9/11 novel” (136). It disrupts and “parodies the cultural certainties [of] trauma narratives” and semi-fictionalised “Muslim misery memoirs” (Morey 136) that have emerged as the predominant literary genres since the catastrophe struck. As a result, the novel is the pseudo-confession of a “reluctant fundamentalist” rather than the acceptable or expected confession of a repentant Islamic terrorist. It is ultimately unclear when (and whether) Changez’s “confession” morphs into an accusation.

Changez, the novel’s protagonist, “hijacks” an unnamed American’s attention in the Anarkali Bazaar of Lahore, metaphorically holding him hostage with an intricate yarn woven out of sundry personal details, including a long-winded autobiographical narrative of his four-year stint in the US. Changez’s monopolisation of his conversation with the unidentified addressee (the novel is a dramatic monologue) in many ways overturns the power dynamic between confessor and interrogator. Time and again, Changez highlights the American’s squirming discomfort and his wish to get away from the former’s storytelling stranglehold. Thus, rather than an inquisitorial structure in which the questioner has to

coax, trick, or threaten information out of the confessor, the novel presents a bizarre interrogation-elicitation scenario in which the detainee is not a terrorist with a secret to hide at any cost but a voluble Pakistani professor who is only too willing and eager to offer up unsolicited data. As a result, the classic terrorist interrogator—the American with the torture apparatus at his disposal—becomes the bulldozed recipient of a verbal onslaught, desperate to flee the site of interrogation.

What is even more radical about *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is the way in which it opens up the meaning of the definitional event. The novel problematises post-evental mourning and posits what I call an “ethic of impressions.” By this I mean a mode of living one’s life attuned to that which is fleeting, the sideshows that appear and disappear in passing, as opposed to a hyperbolic reverence of eventalism. An ethic of impressions thus offsets and corrects the tendency within eventalism that converts everything into an absolute, an all-too-legibly etched writing on the wall of history.

Critics such as Anna Hartnell have identified the (heavy-handed) symbolism of Hamid’s narrative structure. Changez’s love interest, an upper-class white woman named Erica, they argue, stands in as a rather obvious analogue and eponymous equivalent of (Am)erica. Erica’s slip-page into a depressive, self-destructive state of mourning for her dead lover Chris (who succumbed to cancer a year before Changez and Erica’s meeting) works as a personalised decline into a kind of elegiac mode that parallels America’s “giving itself over to a dangerous nostalgia” (Hamid 115) in the weeks and months following 9/11. As the country’s landscape is overtaken by the rhetoric of duty and honour wherein a war mentality feeds off of a melancholic drive to avenge tragedy, Erica regresses into a self-destructive isolation. Her atrophying body, emotional inaccessibility, proclivity for “spacing out” (86), and sexual frigidity clearly mark the limits of Changez’s access and the boundaries of his ability to enter her world. Likewise, America’s adamant harking back to its days of unchallenged First Worldism as a way to cope with the trauma of 9/11 results in people like Changez being branded “fuck-ing Arab[s]” (117) and becoming isolated in post-evental America. The novel positions mourning in the face of tragedy as an exclusionary vio-

lence that builds walls rather than solidarities, both in the private and public-political realms.

Critics fail to note, however, that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* does not, by any means, proscribe mourning. On the contrary, one might argue that the novel is a lesson in affectively progressive and politically radical modes of grieving. Near the end of novel, Changez explicitly self-identifies as a mourner and confesses to being “washed over” by “waves of mourning” (172) after Erica’s suicide and his return to Lahore. The disappearance of his lover and the simultaneous collapse of his “personal American dream” (93) compound as a double blow that yields an excess of the sense of loss, which Changez neither disavows nor fails to lament.

Rather, the novel critiques a narcissistic turning inward that is manifested in the “Am/Erica” (Morey 70) model of mourning: a xenophobic insularity that is “unwilling to reflect” upon “shared pain” and instead takes recourse to “myths” of “superiority” (Hamid 168). America’s blindness to what Judith Butler calls the “geopolitical distribution of corporeal vulnerability” (29) and its unwillingness to recognise that “loss makes a tenuous ‘we’ of us all” (Butler 20)—an inter-relational collective—is what differentiates Am/Erica’s mourning from Changez’s. I argue that, consistent with Butler’s politics, Changez, after his disenchantment with America’s finance capitalism and its self-congratulatory rhetoric of multiculturalism, deliberately works to maintain grief as a means to recover a “collective responsibility for the physical lives of” others (Butler 30). Changez’s insistence that America is united in a “shared pain” with those who attacked it (Hamid 168), his understanding that “we cannot reconstitute ourselves as autonomous beings” (174) and that sympathy is not merely a “distraction” (99), and his critique of the insulating and inuring “armour of denial” (95) that separates us from the pain of others articulate an affirmative, alternative politics of memorialisation. Thus even as Erica’s mourning for her dead lover intensifies after 9/11, resulting in her withdrawal from the world and solipsistic retreat into her memories and fantasies of Chris, Changez’s response to 9/11 is to follow an obverse path: he instinctively moves outward, into the world, beyond America.

It is easy to mistake the event of 9/11 as being at the heart of Changez’s affectively and materially altered relationships with his co-workers, the

airport authorities, the city of New York, and the American nation in general. In other words, the novel allows or even encourages us to imagine that a defining terroristic act, as a cut-off point and watershed event, lies at the structural heart of the novel's plot development. On the surface of things, Changez is alerted to the economic and military discrepancies between the mismatched "American bombers and their twenty-first-century weaponry and the ill-equipped and ill-fed Afghan tribesman" (99) in the context of 9/11. However, his disenchantment with the foundations and "fundamentals" of his high-society corporate life in New York begins prior to the event and therefore may more exactly be read as rooted not so much in the subtle, insidious hostility he endures by virtue of his post-9/11 outsider status as in the "impressions" (68) that he gathers and accumulates in his travels outside America, impressions that "hardly constitute events" (68) but nevertheless irrevocably unsettle his assimilationist desires.

The first of these "impressions" occurs during his time in Manila, to which Changez travels to determine the market value of a recorded-music corporation. Armoured in a business suit and galvanised by his determination to "act and speak . . . more like an *American*" (65; emphasis in original), Changez learns to command Filipino workers double his age with the authority and self-assurance of those who know they are "members of the officer class of global business" (65). While travelling through the heavily congested roads in a limousine, Changez looks out of the window only to realise that a *jeepney* driver is staring at him aggressively. Although Changez's first response is to return the hostile gesture, he continues to feel disoriented and struggles to "understand why he [the driver] acted as he did" (67) long after their stare-down comes to an end. Ironically, the exchanged gaze unleashes his recognition of a "shared sort of Third World sensibility," an intimacy that brings to light for Changez the dubiousness of his sham "play-acting" and his fruitless attempts at fashioning himself as an American (67). As Changez dwells sullenly on this ephemeral moment, he has a dawning, quasi-epiphanic realisation that he is "much closer to the Filipino driver" than to the white American sitting next to him in the limousine and "ought to be making [his] way home, like the people on the street outside" (67).

Changez's capacity to find an affinity outside the cocoon of his vehicle, in the fummy traffic of a Third World country, and his ability to be moved by a glance—albeit one charged with palpable dislike—ready him to undergo a transformation.

Similarly, the conversations Changez has while on a work trip to Valparaiso, Chile (this time after 9/11), act as the “final catalyst” (150) for his political awakening. Jean-Bautista, the chief of the publishing firm Changez is assessing, scathingly critiques him as a modern day janissary, a young, trained soldier who fights his own people on behalf of his “adopted empire” (151). Jean-Bautista's accusation compels Changez to take stock of his ethically compromised participation in the American neo-imperial project.

Non-evental urban spatiality dismantles event-centrism in the novel more than fleeting encounters on streets and cryptic, guilt-inducing conversations with old-world publishers, however. Changez's travels through Valparaiso and his return to Lahore—cities that are “powerfully atmospheric” and ripple with “former aspirations to grandeur” (144), where ruins commingle with the buzz of modernity and where one is compelled to “amble at a pace so slow” that it would be “illegal . . . in New York” (150)—introduce him to a random and easy mode of ambulatory urban living that is intrinsically antithetical to the high pressure poetics and politics of the event. If New York, the ultimate metropolis of the globalised world, is the site of the uber-event, the ideal location for the performance of a theatrical event overloaded with surcharged symbolism, then the relaxed and non-definitional mode of Third World urban spatiality evoked in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is one in which an alternative cognitive and emotive relationship to sensory stimuli may be developed; this holds even when tourists feel threatened and on edge.

Therefore it is hardly incidental that Changez corners the American tourist/spy in the Anarkali Bazaar. Hamid invokes this Third World bazaar as a site of cultural resistance anchored in a dynamic history that is as much tainted by the past as resistant of future-oriented, neoliberal space-revamping technologies. Therefore, while the “newer [read: gentrified] districts of Lahore are poorly suited to the needs of those who must walk” and confirm the “superiority of the mounted man over the

man on foot,” the bazaar, “the congested, maze-like heart of this city . . . is more democratically *urban*. Indeed, in these places it is the man with four wheels who is forced to dismount and becomes part of the crowd” (32; emphasis in original). While the bazaar’s bustling hospitality to walkers may align it to some aspects of Manhattan, it is nonetheless an absolute and conspicuous antithesis of a First World city in the all-important sense that it harbours and countenances with a measure of normalising workaday equanimity all manners of perennial threats, from murderous-looking waiters to pestilent and persistent beggars, and from unhygienic food to flying bats and ominously chatty strangers.

In fact, in as much as literally everything in the bazaar is potentially frightening to the American, Changez forces the American to recognise himself as implicated within the universal circuit of paranoia and anxiety; the American is a threatening presence in this postcolonial setting. The bulge in his jacket that may or not be a hidden gun, his hesitancy to talk on the phone in Changez’s presence even though it keeps ringing, and his insistence on sitting with his back to the wall so that the market’s vistas lie before him for unhindered surveillance are ambivalent and uncertain markers. He may be on an espionage mission, or his behaviour may simply be an innocent hesitancy betokening a foreigner’s awkwardness in an unfamiliar setting. Either way, the American is made as much a part of the risk-laden uncertainty of urban life in Lahore as the other elements that endlessly worry and terrorise the American.

It seems almost as though Changez coerces the American to experience impressionist, non-evental encounters that are impossible to classify or comprehend with any absolute finality and certainty, encounters whose meanings remain elusive and outside the frame of a monological explanatory totality. Unlike the discursive framing of events that are neatly compartmentalised as threats (when they are performed by one’s “enemies”) or necessary pre-emptive/punitive strikes (when undertaken by oneself), what the American endures in the Anarkali Bazaar is neither entirely innocuous nor absolutely dangerous; it always remains on the brink of the melodramatic and climactic, but usually deflates on the side of the inconsequential. Because of this seesawing between total risk and utter inconsequentiality, the novel is haunted by a perennial and ubiquitous sense of

latent (but unactualised) terror that floats indefinitely and unnervingly through the text without being fully exhausted or fully abrogated.

It is thus strategic that the open-endedness of the encounter between Changez and the American is maintained until the very end of the novel: the tension persists, yet no final showdown ever occurs between the two men. Indeed the novel shuts down before any real crisis or eventual-confrontation transpires. We do not know if Changez, potentially in cahoots with the suspicious waiter, will kill the American or if the American is a spy who finally has the chance, and will use the pretext of feeling threatened in a dark alley, to assassinate Changez, a firebrand anti-American activist.

Moreover, the spectral ambience and atmosphere of the Anarkali Bazaar makes this curiously non-evental encounter possible. In Changez's monologue, the bazaar evolves into a haunted spatiality that unsettles and unravels the American's anchoring certitudes: the waiter, despite all clues to the contrary, is more than hospitable and attentive to his clients; the culinary fare proves delectable; and the bazaar itself, far from being antiquated, turns out to be as open to modern, college-going women as it is to suspicious-looking strangers who ogle them. In other words, like Derrida's spectre, the bazaar belongs outside the order of knowledge and certainly outside the American's knowledge. It does not hide a secret that the American must uncover—perhaps, as he might imagine, and prevent an event from occurring—but undoes the West's presumptions about certain geographies and people haunting and terrorising the First World.

Fascinatingly, then, the novel destabilises both the pre-evental mobility aspirations of young people who imagine America as a utopia of endless possibilities and the mobility-presumptions of those empowered by post-evental zeal to travel the world perhaps in the hope of correcting barbaric practices and non-democratic politics. Changez has to learn the lesson that pre-9/11 America was not all that different from its more exaggeratedly xenophobic version after the World Trade Center attacks: upon closer scrutiny, for example, the “marvellously diverse” group of young recruits at Underwood Samson (the prestigious finance firm where Changez lands a job after graduating from Princeton) prove to be

“virtually indistinguishable” (they are all from Ivy League institutions, and none of them are short or overweight) (38). Similarly, the American is made to experience, as he suffers a prolonged, ambient hostility that makes him feel (or so Changez suggests) “ill at ease. . . . like an animal that has ventured too far from its natural habitat” and does not know if it’s the predator or the prey (31), that his very presence carries the overdetermined load of First World smugness and unwelcome intervention that not even the enormity of 9/11 can justify.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist, then, writes back to the evental centres; it is a fiction that prompts its readers to develop a more hesitant and “reluctant” affective response to the late-modern world and its difficult realities (in other words, a less knee-jerk and explosive mentality). It replies to the West’s taut readiness for an Event with the certainty-dissipating and fundamentally unfinalised economy of the non-event.

VI. Conclusion

In this essay I have investigated the ways in which contemporary fiction from the subcontinent responds to the seemingly unanimous and all-pervasive fixation with colossal moments—revolutionary, politically progressive, or apocalyptic, terroristic ones—that grip our collective global imaginary like never before. The post-9/11 context of the war on terror epitomizes the cloying power of event-centric narratives. Terroristic catastrophes have become the milestones that orient the histories of First World nations in the new millennium; moreover, these events are posited as justification for rewriting the histories of Third World countries. Thus it is imperative that those of us invested in challenging the easy consensus surrounding event-formation turn our attention to the sites and sources that confront and destabilize this process. I contend that novels such as *Sacred Games*, *The God of Small Things*, and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* offer precisely such an occasion to resist the allure of the event.

All three novels shrink from climactic moments, evading the event in favour of desultory non-events and the quotidian. If the event ruptures time between a before and an after, if it cleaves the world into event-sufferers/survivors and event-perpetrators, then Roy’s “narratives of

connection” and Hamid’s ethics of mourning challenge us to build solidarity where only rifts appear. Instead of subjects that come into being only in response to events, Chandra and Hamid create protagonists like Sartaj and Changez who emerge as political subjects as a result of their peripheral, subsidiary encounters with the everyday. The evental, in fact, fails them in every possible way.

In a sense, then, the historic move essayed in such contemporary post-colonial fiction emerging from South Asia lies in the implicated gesture of refusal and resistance; it lies in forcing us to remember, confront, and even foreground that cancelled part of the record and human narrative which the absolute—but also crucially selective—centralization of events such as the 9/11 attacks on the US (or the current discourse of a war against organised terror) would have us elide. To question the hyper-visibility of the event is to ask what has changed since the disaster, for whom, and who has a stake in elevating any given event as “The Event.” Notably, the salutary reminder in the relativising challenge posed here to the supremacist authority of the exclusively definitional event (while taking nothing away from the horror and monumental human tragedy of the New York attacks of 9/11/2001) is that there are “other struggles going on and the larger landscape of rage and hopelessness [is] engulfing more and more people” (Sassen 313).

Even more significantly, these fictional narratives prompt us to envision a more nuanced and multilayered literary and historical response to violent modern-metropolitan events and the ensuing feelings of loss, mourning, and absence. They encourage a non-grandstand response that celebrates the radical potential latent in the everydayness of the “non-event,” which conceives of a life in which we are not required to endlessly genuflect and forever and completely submit to the daunting shadow of one, and only one, master-instant that throws a shadow over everything else.

Notes

- 1 This is different from Badiou’s idea of the event as a radical break, a volcanic stoppage, or even a Heideggerian episode of transcendence and novelty arrived at not by leaping out of the tangled cycles of everydayness, but by attaining a

changed perspective (Sayeau 15–16). Deleuze describes an ideal event as a “singularity—or rather a set of singularities” which are “turning points and points of inflection; bottle necks, knots, foyers, and centers; points of fusion, condensation and boiling; points of tears and joy, sick and health, hope and anxiety, ‘sensitive’ points” (Deleuze 52).

- 2 The omniscient narrator’s account is interspersed with Gaitonde’s first person narrative, which constitutes the other half of the book.
- 3 In a conventional mystery the ultimate goal of the detective is not simply to catch the culprit but also to reinstate a moral-rational order. The detective’s function, then, is to establish the murderous/criminal/terroristic event that unleashed the novel’s crisis as an aberrant moment. However, this desire to oust the criminal and reinstate the moral norm, although temporarily achieved within the novelistic framework, will inevitably be reversed. The very existence of the detective confirms the unavoidability and necessity of the recurrence of crime. Additionally, most mysteries elide the fact that the extrication of individual villains will not end structural crimes and injustices. What is unique about *Sacred Games* is that it acknowledges this unsettling truth and embraces the eternal deferral (and impossibility) of the detective’s impulse to mastery.

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