

Neoliberalism's Children:
India's Economy, Wageless Life, and
Organized Crime in *The Moor's Last Sigh*
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Abstract: As a comment on India after the publication of *Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie's 1995 novel *The Moor's Last Sigh* offers a broad-based critique of modern India within the context of economic policy shifts that followed the country's independence from British rule in 1947. The gradual implementation of neoliberal economic policies in the 1980s and 1990s accompanied India's emergence as a major player in the global capitalist economy but also led to drastic increases in income inequality, unemployment, and the proliferation of a vast informal sector of exploitable human capital. Rushdie's novel identifies India's entrepreneurial and capitalist classes, specifically in Mumbai/Bombay, as complicit in the exacerbation of the class disparity that has led, in many cases, to increased cultural tensions between Hindus and Muslims as well as the growing ubiquity of government corruption and organized crime. The novel offers additional insight into the exploitative logic of Hindu nationalist politics through its parodic depiction of the Shiv Sena party, which derives much of its political clout through its patriarchal, mafia-esque relationship with urban slum dwellers. *The Moor's Last Sigh* delineates new and complex forms of oppression and exploitation in postcolonial India that often occur simultaneously along class and cultural lines.

Keywords: neoliberalism, globalization, wageless life, Salman Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh*

In January 2012, Salman Rushdie tweeted his disappointment about cancelling an impending trip to the Jaipur Literature Festival in India: “Very sad not to be at Jaipur,” he wrote. “I was told bombay mafia don issued weapons to 2 hitmen to ‘eliminate’ me. Will do video link instead. Damn.” The assassins of whom Rushdie spoke presumably worked for Dawood Ibrahim, a notorious Bombay-based Muslim crime boss with “the same resonance in India as Osama bin Laden has in the US” (former Indian Deputy Prime Minister L. K. Advani qtd. in Clarke 50).¹ Nearly twenty-three years after the initial publication of *The Satanic Verses* (1989), Rushdie found himself yet again living in the shadow of the infamous *fatwa* Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini issued against him for authoring the novel. As head of the international crime syndicate D-Company, Ibrahim’s ties to Al Qaeda, Pakistani terror group Lakshar-e-Taiba, and the Taliban have inflected his illicit business dealings throughout India in recent years, particularly “Supari Commerce,” or contract killing (Clarke 48–50). It seems that Rushdie’s decision to abort his trip was sound.

Rushdie’s most recent brush with Bombay’s criminal underworld was not his first. *The Moor’s Last Sigh* (1995), his first major post-*fatwa* literary effort, contains a jarring depiction of the 1993 Bombay bombings, which Ibrahim is widely believed to have masterminded. The attacks, which strategically targeted highly visible locations throughout the metropole such as the Bombay Stock Exchange, the Air India Building, and the Sahar International Airport, killed hundreds of innocent civilians across the city. Many viewed the attacks as a response to anti-Muslim riots and pogroms following the destruction of the Babri Mosque at Ayodhya months earlier at the hands of the Hindu fundamentalist Baratiya Janata Party. Ibrahim’s alleged involvement continues to raise a particularly pressing set of concerns. Until the attacks, his business interests were relatively secular. Hindus and Muslims had always co-existed within D-Company’s ranks and Ibrahim’s net worth of \$430 million was largely dependent on a vast networked underworld that operated across communal divides and national borders, including dealings with the Pakistani military establishment (Lal 297). What caused D-Company’s abrupt ideological shift? For Rollie Lal, the organization’s involvement in the bombings demonstrated how organized crime net-

works can become radicalized over time and, beyond “tactical alliances of convenience,” function as crucial sources of financial support for terrorist groups (293). The key notion here, and one that raises further and more urgent questions, is that of financial support: how and why did D-Company amass its fortune and why was it suddenly using its wealth to sponsor terrorist attacks?

Rushdie was certainly aware of these revelations while writing *The Moor's Last Sigh*, and as the novel's protagonist, Moraes “Moor” Zogoiby, witnesses the horror of the attacks, he expresses concerns that his father, international business mogul Abraham, is behind them. Comparisons between Abraham and Ibrahim are intriguing, especially considering Rushdie's propensity to caricature larger-than-life political and cultural figures such as Indira Gandhi (*Midnight's Children*), Margaret Thatcher (*The Satanic Verses*), and Bal Thackeray (*The Moor's Last Sigh*). “Ibrahim” is Arabic for the Hebrew “Abraham.” Although Rushdie's fictional Abraham hails from the Jewish enclaves of Cochin, he is partially Muslim; his heritage is tied to an illegitimate son of the last Moorish Sultan of Grenada, Boabdil. Both Abraham and Ibrahim initiated lucrative business careers through smuggling, either spices (Abraham) or gold (Ibrahim), and both eventually diversify their business interests to include drug trafficking, real estate, and arms dealing.² Surprisingly little attention has been paid to the parallels between fictional character and existing crime boss; instead, scholars have zeroed in on the perhaps more obvious allegorical veins of Rushdie's novel, particularly in terms of Moor's artist mother Aurora and the means by which she reimagines India. Several scholars have analyzed the ways in which Aurora's art depicting Moorish Spain, for example, acts as a “historical mirror” to Nehruvian secularism (Cundy 111) or is an allegorical representation of early modern India in which peaceful, harmonious multiculturalism rules (Narain). The destruction of Aurora's art in the midst of communal violence has led others to read the novel as a pessimistic elegy to the declining possibility of harmonious multiculturalism in India (Deszcz) or a cautionary tale about the valorization of cultural hybridity as a means of combatting the residual effects of colonial race and class prejudices (Cantor; Laouyene; Dohra Ahmad).

I acknowledge the value of this work but think it is crucial to shift critical tack in order to focus on Abraham as an entry point to understanding the novel's engagement with contemporary global India. At the helm of India's post-Independence thrust into modernity (punctuated by the neoliberal economic policy reform of the 1980s and 1990s), Abraham straddles the line between Bombay's sparkling upper class and its dark economic underbelly, which is characterized by increasing economic disparity, organized criminal networks, and violent communalism. Because any reading of *The Moor's Last Sigh* must first recognize the ways in which it comments on the state of India after the publication *Midnight's Children*, I contend that the former is best understood within the context of India's emergence as a global economic power in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In this study, I argue that *The Moor's Last Sigh* functions as Rushdie's re-visitation of India and powerfully critiques contemporary Indian society. Yumna Siddiqi suggests that the novel, which exhibits key elements of the thriller genre, performs this critique by demonstrating, through an examination of the fascist tendencies of Hindu nationalist politics, that "political society can and does take regressive forms" (1230). This essay recognizes and expands on this assertion to examine the ways in which Rushdie's text identifies corrosive effects of India's open-market economy, particularly those aspects caused by an entrepreneurial class that stands to benefit most—politically and financially—from widening markets, an increased emphasis on privatization, and government corruption.

Further, I argue that Rushdie represents Bombay's economic underworld as the true obstacle to cultural and democratic progress in post-Independence India. More specifically, *The Moor's Last Sigh* revises the portentous conclusion of *Midnight's Children*, in which the protagonist, Saleem Sinai, is engulfed by India's vast, multitudinous crowd, which he predicts will "make progress impossible" (Rushdie 532). In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, India's lack of progress toward achieving cultural and political harmony is not the fault of "the crowd" alone: the corrosive side effects of post-Independence economic policy, from the *dirigiste* interventionism of the 1950s through the 1970s and liberalization in the 1980s and 1990s, has led to a drastic bifurcation of India's richest and poor-

est inhabitants as a consequence of both legitimate and illegal capitalist and political pursuits, often through the exploitation of an expanding sector of informal, “wageless” human capital. In this way, *The Moor's Last Sigh* is a literary examination of India's post-Independence cultural and political struggles against the backdrop of widening markets, trade liberalization, and growing domestic income inequality.

I. India's Economy: Independence (1947)—Structural Adjustment (1990–91)

As a Bombay native born in the year of India's independence, Rushdie has witnessed the country's rise out of the shackles of colonialism to a position of global economic power. The narrative of *The Moor's Last Sigh* unfolds during the nation's formative pre- and post-Independence years, during which the state initiated a break from colonially built economic scaffolding that was largely erected to serve foreign interests. Until Independence, the impact of modern industrialism in India had been limited almost entirely to the heavy importation of manufactured goods from abroad. Little had been done to promote domestic economic development and domestic manufacturing was largely limited to textile production (Patel 334). As a result, India's post-Independence economy bore the markings of classic *dirigiste* development: tight state control of infrastructure development and strategic industries; expansion and strengthening of the economy's productive base; the nationalization of existing, and the establishment of new, financial institutions (including the Bank of India); and regulation and coordination of economic activity.³ “With roots in the freedom struggle itself” (Chandrasekhar and Ghosh 3), India's economic policy for the first three decades following Independence was characterized by a strong state interventionist role.

The *dirigiste* model resulted in relatively stagnant growth. While the rest of the developing world experienced, on average, three percent growth per capita during the post-war period, India achieved less than half that figure due to intense regulation of private enterprise with, Gurcharan Das contends, “the most stringent price and production controls in the world” (4).⁴ Predictably, Das, the center/right-leaning former Chief Executive Officer of Proctor & Gamble turned journalist and writer,

identifies this period as one characterized by “the worst features of capitalism and socialism” instituted by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and, later, his daughter, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (4). However, conditions soon shifted in favor of business elites. Moderate reform in the 1980s, specifically through the liberalization of imports—particularly luxury goods, such as electronics and automobiles, to satiate the appetite of a fast-growing middle class—was accompanied by a reliance on external debt to support government-financed economic stimulus.⁵

While these measures stimulated short-term growth, they ultimately led to a fiscal crisis and dramatic reform in the 1990s best described as starkly neoliberal in nature. As defined by David Harvey, neoliberalism has functioned since its emergence in the 1960s as

a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. (2)

Economic policy reform in India followed just such a prescriptive process around freedom and individualism and was characterized by the curtailed presence of the state in economic affairs, the liberalization of imports to provide the private sector with uninhibited access to foreign markets as well as to capital goods and raw materials in order to become more competitive in such markets, domestic deregulation in deference to market forces, greater access to international capital, both productive and financial, less overbearing tax policies and structures, and, under pressure from the International Monetary Fund, devaluation of the rupee.⁶

The Moor's Last Sigh effectively captures snapshots of India's evolving economic climate. “Bombay was central,” reflects Moor, and “[t]he wealth of the country flowed through its exchanges, its ports” (Rushdie 351). Bombay, one of India's most modern cities, has in many ways been representative of the state's ebbing influence on economic development

in India. As “the first Indian town to experience economic, technological, and social changes associated with the growth of capitalism in India” (Patel 328), Bombay had already emerged as a “global city” by the time *The Moor's Last Sigh* was published in 1995. Very much an example of what Saskia Sassen identifies as a “global city,” one of a handful of metropolises that have transformed under the auspices of global capitalism into “highly concentrated command points in the organization of the world economy” (3), Bombay has become a financial hub for one of the world's fastest growing economies of the last quarter century and experienced a capitalist renaissance with increased investments in communications and a service industry boom (Patel 336). Bombay is central in more ways than one: culturally, it stands out as India's most cosmopolitan city and in terms of demographics is an expression of the nation's eclectic cultural heritage. Moor is a veritable product of the city's cultural history; as the son of a Jewish-Muslim father and Portuguese-Catholic mother, he represents the zenith of India's cultural eclecticism.

In many ways, then, Bombay has represented the myriad possibilities of global capitalism. Insofar as this narrative of Bombay's rise to economic prominence benefitted a highly specific portion of the city's population, the figure of the entrepreneur is central to what Das considers India's “success story” (3). Throughout the novel, Abraham embodies the entrepreneurial zeitgeist of the reform era. Abraham is described as ambitious from his youth, a “genius in the making” (Rushdie, *Moor's* 81), and soon after taking over the da Gama Trading Company he initiates an ambitious coup against one of India's oldest business families, the House of Cashondeliveri, who are money-lenders with vast holdings in banking, land, ships, chemicals, and fish. In the process, he acquires holdings in some of Bombay's most lucrative markets for just pennies on the dollar. Before long, he forges his empire by establishing the corporate entity of Siodicorp, from which he diversifies, for example, into the Baby Softo Talcum Powder Company, which he envisions “taking on Johnson & Johnson in their home markets” (184). He also positions Siodicorp as a major player in the Khazana Bank International (KBI), “which by the end of the 1980s had become the first financial institution to rival the great Western banks in terms of assets and transactions”

(334). By doing so, Abraham—and, by extension, the Zogoiby family—represent what Harvey identifies within the ubiquity of neoliberalism as a “rising class power” which has taken advantage of “entrepreneurial opportunities . . . and all manner of possibilities to buy cheap and sell dear, if not to actually corner markets in such a way as to build fortunes that can either extend horizontally . . . or be diversified into all manner of businesses . . . [including] financial services, real-estate development, and retailing” (34). Abraham builds his empire by capitalizing on the changing landscape of India’s economy.

However, although Abraham functions as the novel’s avatar of entrepreneurship, his individual narrative suggests that India’s so-called success story comes at a price. As much as Abraham gains from widening domestic markets and an increased emphasis on privatization and entrepreneurial freedom, he is also the benefactor of widespread government corruption and a growing underground economy that allows him to diversify in darker, less savory directions. The novel’s depiction of corruption, often related cynically by Moor, is consistent with post-reform realities; economists such as Chandrasekhar and Ghosh note that while state withdrawal from economic matters would necessarily reduce red tape and corruption by submitting to the “discipline of the market,” corruption and cronyism actually increased to unprecedented levels (Chandrasekhar and Ghosh 38). In both the pre- and post-liberalization eras, corruption has been so prevalent that it prompted former Indian Central Vigilance Commissioner N. Vittal to remark that “[w]e seem to be living in an India where there is a scam in a week if not a scam a day” (17). While a full account of post-reform corruption is beyond the scope of this study, it is worth noting that *The Moor’s Last Sigh* remains alive to the propensity of government officials to look the other way during Abraham’s increasingly illicit enterprises, particularly those involving drug smuggling, financial trading, and eventually, land development and real estate.

As Moor reflects on his father’s involvement in bribery and corruption scandals, it becomes increasingly apparent to him that “beneath [Abraham’s] glittering monetarist vision there existed a hidden layer of activity” (Rushdie, *Moor’s* 334). True to its name, Siodicorp

receives cash on the delivery of illicit goods, initially by lining “the imperial pockets” of the British Navy during World War II to protect Abraham’s western-bound spice shipments from German U-Boats (112). The Baby Softo Talcum Powder Company emerges as a thinly veiled front for an international cocaine smuggling operation; Moor intimates that “the white powder [Abraham] was interested in did not come from quarries in the Western Ghats, but found its way into selected Baby Softo canisters by a highly unusual route . . . and extensive and systematic bribery of policemen and other officials” (184). Even Siodicorp’s dealings with the KBI are illicit. Among the bank’s largest clients are “a number of gentlemen and organizations whose names were featured on the most-wanted and most-dangerous lists of every country in the free world ” (335). In addition to the KBI’s extensive measures to cover up and disguise such “shadow accounts,” the bank’s greatest enterprise involves the “financing and secret manufacture ‘for certain oil-rich countries and their ideological allies’ of large-scale nuclear weaponry” (335).

It is also important to remember that Abraham’s story is not representative of the broad-based effects of economic policy reform in India insofar as it conveys a sense of widespread prosperity, however illicitly acquired. In reality, economic development has been far more uneven and disjunctive; for the vast majority of urban dwellers, India’s economic gains have not unfolded in the form of a success story. In particular, neoliberal policy reform has accelerated the transformation of the city’s culture and class fabric in ways that suggest that it only entailed a change in the relationship between the state and the economy insofar as it represented a “change in the character of the association” (Chandrasekhar and Ghosh 38) in which the state increasingly intervened in the name of economic growth rather than matters of welfare. While the state increasingly neglected basic obligations toward its citizens by failing to provide necessities such as housing, healthcare, education, and sanitation, “state actions remained crucial to the ways in which the markets functioned and the ability of capital to pursue its different goals” (38). In other words, India’s shifting economic landscape represented more of a restructuring in which the mechanisms supporting welfare expenditure

were phased out in deference to those ensuring economic growth in the global capitalist economy.

Such uneven development has been well documented in post-Independence Bombay, particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century. Income stagnation, especially among those who occupy the lowest rungs of the socio-economic ladder, has become the norm even as richer segments of India's population have benefited from liberalization.⁷ In many cases, rising inequality has become nearly synonymous with rising unemployment and a rapidly expanding informal sector. For example, unemployment in Bombay doubled between 1981 and 1996. During a similar period (1981–91), the informal sector increased from an estimated 55% of the city's population to 65.6% of the population (Patel 335). Such realities lurk in the background throughout *The Moor's Last Sigh*, and although Moor's narration emanates strictly from the comfortable cloisters of Bombay's most privileged classes, the text permits key glimpses into Abraham's encounters—often a consequence of illegal business dealings—with Bombay's underclass.

II. Wageless Life: Neoliberalism and Abraham's Invisible Workforce

If Abraham's involvement in organized crime obliquely connects him to Ibrahim, a figure that continues to loom large in the collective imagination of Bombayites, both his prosperity and his façade as a legitimate businessman greatly depend on the city's underclass. The complicated topography of Bombay's economic underworld, however, suggests the grave inadequacy of "underworld" as an accurate descriptor of illegal capitalist ventures that are, in many instances, controlled from above. For Suketu Mehta, "underworld" is not just inaccurate but wrong:

[I]t implies something hidden, something beneath. In Bombay, the underworld is the overworld; it is somehow suspended *above* this world and can come down to strike any time it chooses. The hit men refer to the operational centers of the gangs—Karachi, Dubai, Malaysia—as upar—"above," and Bombay as neeche, "below." There can be nothing under "below." (134; italics in original)

From “above,” Abraham exploits vulnerable, underemployed wage laborers “below” to illegally construct his corporate headquarters. Drawing on a pool of recently arrived, destitute migrants proves an economical business practice; because they arrived following a recent census, “they were deemed not to exist,” a status that allows the city to “[bear] no responsibility for their housing and welfare” (Rushdie, *Moor's* 186). While Abraham pays them a pittance, he revels in the city's paltry labor laws, reflecting that “naturally we accepted no responsibility in case of ill-health or injury. . . . After all, these people were not just invisible, but actually, according to official pronouncements, simply not at all there” (187).

The image of the invisible, excluded slum-dweller recurs throughout the text, arising variously as “an invisible reality mov[ing] phantomwise beneath a visible fiction” (184), the “invisible world” (213), “invisible shacks of the invisible poor” (248), and even as “Abraham's invisible city, built by invisible people to do invisible deeds” (335). That these spectral figures are foregrounded in a narrative otherwise told from the perspective of Bombay's cosmopolitan elite indicates Rushdie's awareness of the material consequences of neoliberal ideology in practice in modern India. This is not to suggest, however, that the materialization of Bombay's urban poor neatly parallels the gradual implementation of neoliberal economic policy. In *Midnight's Children*, for example, Saleem is keenly aware of an invisible poor that existed even before Independence. He describes his mother—prior to his birth—entering “causeways where poverty eats away the tarmac like a drought, where people lead their invisible lives” (89). It is this passage that leads Caroline Herbert to conclude that *The Moor's Last Sigh* offers new ways of understanding the invisible lives of which Rushdie was keenly aware in his earlier novel or what she considers the “spectrality” of the excluded urban subject. Hebert deploys the term spectrality in the Derridean sense, as “a ‘prosthetic body’ that bears witness to a subject exploited or excluded by the flows of global capitalism” (947), and suggests that Rushdie's text offers ways to read both for and from the perspective of spectral urban dwellers in the 1980s and 1990s. The city's “toiling bodies become the site of such paradoxical corporeality, at once rendered invisible by the

city they labor to bring into material existence and subject to . . . its most ethnic violence” (948). While I will return to the role of ethnic violence in the exacerbation of widespread class struggle, the former notion of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion in the city’s capitalist transformation offers a useful explanation of the role Abraham’s invisible workforce plays in building a city which is ultimately, for all of their efforts, inaccessible.

However, while identifying the spectrality of those that comprise Abraham’s invisible workforce helps highlight certain subjugated subject positions, I propose an alternative critical framework that offers a systemic understanding of Bombay’s exploited urban subjects and their origins in the fluctuating economic and cultural climates of contemporary India. Unaccounted for by the state, they represent what Michael Denning refers to as “wageless life,” a type of existence that has given rise to an “informal sector” external to normative conceptions of economic infrastructure. Notions of the “informal economies” and “informal sectors” arising in developing countries were originally outlined by development economist Keith Hart in the 1970s and refer to those who make their living through self-employment as opposed to officially-recognized wage earning. While the informal sector, Denning observes, can arise from over-regulation or impotent central governance, it resides within “the logic of post-colonial capitalist accumulation” as a consequence of the failure to develop “inherited colonial labor apparatuses” (90) according to the traditional dual economy model, which normalizes employment and unemployment as categories indicative of economic health.⁸ Moreover, Denning points out that the discourse from which conceptions of the informal economy emerged “saw it as a normal—indeed under neoliberalism, expanding—sphere of economic activity” (90). Alienating pre-existing capitalist infrastructure, in place during colonization and conducive to the “informal” accumulation of capital, informs current iterations of wageless life under the auspices of global capitalism.

Understanding Abraham’s invisibles as a lived example of “wageless life,” materially excluded from the normative infrastructure of India’s formal economy, is useful insofar as it accounts for the relation of the spectral urban underclass to India’s changing economic policies. In

Denning's view, "the only thing worse than being exploited is not being exploited" (79). He suggests that, for the city's marginalized population, inclusion in normative economic infrastructures, however unfair, is preferable to exclusion. His reasoning stems partially from the possibility of unionization and increased protections through grassroots mobilization. Denning sees hope in organizations such as the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), a union in Gujarat formed on behalf of self-employed ragpickers, food vendors, and textile workers (91). Although Abraham pays his workers "small amounts of cash" for their labor (Rushdie, *Moor's* 187), no such prospects exist for them within the context of the novel. On the contrary, any hope for representation grows bleaker with the death of Moor's sister Mynah, a labor rights advocate and Marxist who is eventually killed by a chemical leak while visiting a factory to investigate the maltreatment of female workers from the slums. In one of the darkest revelations of the novel, Moor discovers that an investigation "concluded that the incident had been a deliberate attack on Mynah's organization by 'unnamed outside agents'" and that "a few months previously Mynah had finally succeeded in sending Keke Kolatkar to jail for his property swindles" (276). Abraham, connected to Kolatkar through their mutual land-grab ventures, bears partial responsibility for the murder of his own daughter, which was carried out to protect his unethical source of wage labor.

The Moor's Last Sigh remains bound to the hopelessness of wageless life through the end of the novel. As Liza Weinstein notes, the majority of violence perpetrated during the 1992–93 riots that led up to the 1993 bombings was carried out by "angry young men," an out-of-work male population mobilized and exploited by the Shiv Sena and similar Hindu nationalist organizations to perpetuate, often violently, Hindu nationalist agendas (28). Yet the possibility remains that the same sectarian energies harnessed by the Shiv Sena may be redirected for positive change, at least theoretically. Denning, for example, is careful to bundle his conception of wageless life with Franz Fanon's resurrection of Karl Marx's term *lumpenproletariat*, originally understood as a derelict population existing hierarchically beneath the proletariat collective and unlikely to experience class mobility. The *lumpenproletariat* exists for

Fanon within “new urban populations of the Third World” (Denning 87) and, as a “cohort of starving men, divorced from tribe and clan, constitutes one of the most spontaneously and radically revolutionary forces of a colonized people” (Fanon qtd. in Denning 88). Reimagined thus, the revolutionary potential of the wageless “invisibles” suggests that any radical shift in conditions for India’s underclass lies in the hands of “the crowd.”⁹

III. The World’s Largest Slums: Organized Crime, Corruption, and Bombay’s Underground Economy

If any part of “the crowd’s” revolutionary potential has been fulfilled, however, it has occurred in the form of an insurrection against law and order, if only for economic gain. India’s thriving underground economy was, at its earliest, a product of vast squatter collectives assembled at the margins of the city. As a consequence of the industrial development that followed Independence—namely, the textile boom—an unprecedented number of unskilled workers flooded Bombay in search of employment (Patel 334). The result was rapid, if slipshod, urbanization; in many cases, worker housing built by factory owners and public officials prior to Independence proved vastly inadequate. State-led plans to expand housing and basic services for this growing population were essentially non-existent and, due to an effort to curtail urban expansion, often resembled willful neglect on the part of public officials (Weinstein 26). Consequently large portions of the city’s skyrocketing population found refuge in slum neighborhoods, often with little or no access to basic services. Between 1951 and 1991, Bombay’s population more than tripled from 2.9 million to 9.9 million (Patel 338); during the same period of time, slum populations also grew. In 1971, twenty percent of the city’s 5.9 million residents lived in the slums; in 1985, slum-dwellers made up over half of the city’s 9 million residents. Today, less than half of the city’s population has legal tenure of the land on which they live (339–40).

Arjun Appadurai, a Bombay native who documents “spectral housing” in the space-starved city, reflects that “[i]t is a banality to say that housing is scarce in Bombay” (“Spectral” 635). He recalls palpable

change in Bombay during the 1970s and describes “a malignant city [that] began to emerge from beneath the surface of the cosmopolitan ethos of the prior period. . . . Jobs became harder to get. More rural arrivals in the city found themselves economic refugees. Slums and shacks began to proliferate” (629). For Appadurai, this signals a malformation inherent in the development of the global cultural economy he describes as a “complex, overlapping, disjunctive order” (“Disjuncture” 296) in which the deterritorialization of culture and class production is the new norm (301).¹⁰ Such disjuncture appears multiple times in Rushdie’s novel, not only in Abraham’s exploitation of the “invisibles” to build his glittering corporate skyscrapers, but also in Aurora’s artistic career as she “zoom[s] around the . . . town in her famous curtained Buick” and “ventur[es] alone into the slum-city of Dharavi” (*Moor’s* 129). Even Moor’s upbringing is sprinkled with encounters with the city’s less affluent spaces and characters. Aurora employs Lambajan Chandiwala as the family gatekeeper, thus saving him from “the worst, gutter-dwelling, begging-bowl consequences” of slum life (135). His wife, Miss Jaya Hé, is Moor’s ayah and introduces him to street-level Bombay and all of its “compacted humanity, being pushed so tightly together that privacy ceased to exist and the boundaries of yourself began to dissolve” (193). Such increased proximity between rich and poor in an already bulging city represents the changing dynamics of a metropolis in flux.

While post-Independence Bombay was bursting at its seams, many recently arrived inhabitants found work harder and harder to come by, particularly in the textile industry. Following a period of modernization and automation, mass layoffs and strikes in 1982–83 resulted in the shuttering of a number of mills and a sharp rise in unemployment despite an increase in overall productivity. City unemployment trends were staggering: while twenty-seven percent of the city’s population found work in the textile industry in 1976, for example, by 1991 the figure was less than half that (Patel 334–35). Placed alongside Bombay’s burgeoning service and financial sectors, Bombay’s unemployment crisis has been indicative of a significant gulf between a new business class and the majority of Bombay’s unskilled and skilled laborers.¹¹ In *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, this division is most starkly apparent in the relationship

between Abraham and the “invisibles.” While neoliberalism and Indian economics have represented a new dynamic in the marriage between the state and the market, the results have not been happy for the majority of Bombay’s inhabitants.

Abraham controls his empire from the sprawling halls and sweeping balconies of the Zogoiby estate, *Elephanta*, and the glittering facade of Cashnodeliveri Tower, and these are the locations from which Moor narrates. His position is especially powerful considering the proximity of the Zogoiby family to Bombay’s organized criminal underworld. Many of Bombay’s organized criminal operations grew out of the city’s struggle with housing. In particular, their paternalistic tradition of proferring housing and basic services to a rapidly expanding population of underemployed slum-dwellers engendered support and allowed them to flourish. During the first few decades of national independence, housing crises and land shortages resulted in a wealth of opportunities for enterprising slumlords. Varadarajan Mudaliar, known on the street as Vardhabhai, was one of the first to take advantage; he built his criminal organization, based on alcohol trafficking in the industrial slum of Dharvi, in the 1960s. Because there were no policy plans in place to account for the growing population of squatters, Vardhabhai used bribery to ensure the perpetuation of the slums both as a safe haven for his liquor business as well as a loyal neighborhood support network. In many cases, slumlords succeeded in illegally securing access to basic services for slum inhabitants, including water, cooking fuel, and ration cards. These acquisitions encouraged tight community bonds based on loyalty.¹²

In the late 1970s and 1980s, organized criminal groups began to strengthen ties to political parties, often by forming alliances with ethnic political movements such as the Shiv Sena (Weinstein 28). While the Sena began as a linguistic movement on behalf of Marathi-speaking citizens, the group renewed itself in the 1980s as a religiously oriented movement and a political party aligned with the protection of Hindu rights. However, according to Sujata Patel, “the Shiv Sena’s latent intent was to promote the economic regime that was emerging in the city through globalization” (342). The Sena created a “culture of depriva-

tion” within various slum neighborhoods and exploited uneven economic development in Bombay by encouraging the growth of an already expansive informal economy. Assuming a patriarchal, mafia-cum-slum lord role, the Sena supported the establishment of petty businesses by providing and financing fast food stalls, for example, or consumer goods for resale on the street. This often resulted in extortion and protection rackets that meant the Sena was able to collect licensing commissions through local municipal officials aligned with the party. These activities were part of the broader *dada* culture that emerged during the middle- and upper-class housing boom of the 1970s. Each *dada*—which means “elder brother” in Marathi but colloquially denotes “Mafia don” in Bombay—was able to “encroach [on] land both for constructing slum settlements and for selling it to builders” (Patel 343). These operations were dependent on violence or the threat of such and led to local neighborhood branches, or *shakhas*, led by local chiefs and concerned with social and economic aspects of life (Patel 344). One of the most significant aspects of *dada* culture for the Shiv Sena and other organizations, however, involves the sense of identity it provided young, unemployed males in the slums. By tapping a populist base, the Sena has been able to encourage violence to achieve political ends (Patel 342–43).

On the surface, Shiv Sena cultural politics have existed opposite Abraham’s capitalist individualism. And yet, as Weinstein insists, “the growth of such a chauvinist movement in Bombay should be seen in context with trends in the country at large as well as in terms of the city’s changing economy” (330). In *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, Raman “Mainduck” Fielding functions as a *dada* figure within just such a unique, if contradictory, context. A cartoonish caricature of the Sena’s founder Bal Thackeray, Fielding—leader of Mumbai’s Axis, a parody of the Sena—harbors a keen ideological opposition to the economic plight of his core constituency: “[H]e was against unions, in favour of breaking strikes . . . against poverty and in favour of wealth” (Rushdie, *Moor’s* 298) and he “derided the Marxist analysis of society as a class struggle and lauded the Hindu preference for the eternal stability of the caste” (299). His aversion to social mobility does not, however, prevent him from breaking from the core polytheistic tenets of Hinduism in order to promote the

primacy of the Lord Rama; he unites his followers under a “single, martial deity, a single book, and mob rule” (338). Like existing *dada* culture, Fielding strives for the perpetuation rather than abolition of the societal hierarchies from which he derives power in the evolving economic logic of Bombay.

While Fielding and Mumbai’s Axis represent, in some ways, the corrosive effects of late capitalism, *The Moor’s Last Sigh* does not exonerate Hindu nationalist politics as a systemic disease but instead suggests a shared culpability for negative implications of neoliberal policy reform that are, at their core, uniquely Indian. Similarly, Thomas Blom Hansen cautions against understanding Hindu nationalism and xenophobic politics “as anomalies inflicted by dark forces or structures of peripheral capitalism” (9). He argues that the Shiv Sena represents a possibility “always folded into India’s unique experience of modernity and democracy” (9). This is an important distinction, for while it is tempting to assign external blame for internal problems—that is, to blame global capitalism for Hindu-Muslim violence—Hindu nationalist politics had been, until the last three or four decades, a dormant but entirely real possibility.

By the time the Shiv Sena was beginning to win its most decisive political victories in the early 1990s, property development had become a boon for criminal outfits such as D-Company, which had begun to abandon smuggling because of the increased competition for foreign consumer goods that resulted from market liberalization and the deregulation of imports (Weinstein 25). By this time, organized criminal networks were investing in Bombay’s suddenly lucrative property market; however, community and political links continued to play a vital role in land and property development enterprises. In particular, high land prices and strict municipal regulation of land development presented an opportunity for organized criminal networks such as D-Company because of government officials “particularly open to corruption” (Weinstein 31).

While land development can be equated to prosperity for Abraham and Ibrahim, however, it has also meant increased access to a marginalized population easily exploited for political gain. In some cases, this

has exacerbated existing intercultural rifts. As noted above, for example, the Shiv Sena took advantage of its strong community ties during mass textile layoffs by leveraging the “seemingly endless supply of angry young men” (Weinstein 28) into advantageous political action. During the Hindu-Muslim riots of 1992–93, the party used populist rhetoric to mobilize angry mobs to target Muslim homes and businesses. In a different vein, D-Company’s decidedly sectarian terrorist response was likely financed through earnings from illegal property development schemes that had been occurring since the early 1990s. A message allegedly sent by Ibrahim on behalf of Bombay Muslims following the bombings read: “Don’t mess with us” (qtd. in Hansen 125). A chilling analog appears in *The Moor’s Last Sigh*: Moor, reflecting on the depth of his father’s involvement in international crime and terrorism, suspects the manufacture of a “so-called Islamic bomb” or “invisible bomb” (Rushdie 341, 335)—perhaps an oblique analogy for the coming explosion of communal violence amongst the urban poor. Moor senses the foreboding apotheosis of Abraham’s continued liaisons with Bombay’s criminal underworld.

By the time Moor witnesses the bomb’s detonation, he has become a reluctant participant in the city’s underworld. Although his participation has been aligned on both sides of the Hindu-Muslim divide, it is not entirely clear who benefits from the bombings:

Many of Abraham’s enemies were hit—policemen, MA cadres, criminal rivals . . . [Abraham] in the hour of his annihilation made a phone call, and the metropolis began to explode. But could even Abraham, with his immense resources, have stockpiled such an arsenal? How could gang warfare explain the legion of innocent dead? Hindu and Muslim areas were both attacked: men, women, and children perished. (372)

Moor suspects his father but confronts the impossibility of assigning blame or delineating aggressor from innocent victim. Sectarian animosities originate from the depths of Indian history such that allocating blame is as impossible for Moor as envisioning progress is for Saleem. Moor himself stumbles upon this bleak epiphany as well: “Maybe Abraham

lit the fuse, or Scar: these fanatics or those, our crazies or yours. . . . We were both the bombers and the bombs” (Rushdie, *Moor's* 372). For Moor, the question of blame is not important; culpability is ubiquitous. Even Abraham is killed in the bombings. Those who carry out the attacks detonate an additional bomb in his high-rise headquarters, and his last words amount to a final, enigmatic command from atop his perch: “Evacuate the building” (375).

IV. Expanding Culpability: *The Moor's Last Sigh* as a Critique of Indian Society

The Bombay bombings, and Moor's perceived complicity, ultimately drive him from India to Spain in search of his mother's magnum opus, “The Moor's Last Sigh,” wherein resides the final trace of his mother's hopes for India. The painting is housed in the fictional Spanish village of Benengeli under the care of Aurora's hated former colleague, Vasco Miranda; however, Miranda destroys the painting and Moor, in his grief, kills him. The novel closes as a fugitive Moor rests in a derelict graveyard in the Spanish countryside, sighing: “*I'll lay me down upon this graven stone . . . and close my eyes . . . and hope to awaken, renewed and joyful, into a better time*” (433–34; emphasis in original). The epitaph presents a subtle irony: although Moor sees untold horror in India, he escapes easily and leaves behind a volatile Bombay that, in the following years, witnesses continuing Hindu-Muslim clashes. That Rushdie's characters have been able to exercise class power in order to escape such difficulties is not a particularly new observation. Critics have questioned the power of *The Satanic Verses* as a critique of cultural and racial issues in the migrant neighborhoods of post-imperial London because of the novel's circumvention or even silencing of migrant voices in deference to Rushdie's prescriptive aesthetics of hybridity (Kalliney; Gane). Such a tendency could be indicative of a larger deficiency within Rushdie's work in which his cosmopolitan status is detrimental to his portrayal of marginalized postcolonial subjects.

Dohra Ahmad suggests that Aurora's artistic difficulties in India's contemporary sectarian climate are a fictionalized representation of Rushdie's own experience with *The Satanic Verses*. The same could be said

for *The Moor's Last Sigh's* carefully crafted commentary on the complicity of well-educated urban elites in Bombay's class disparity and cultural clashes.¹³ While Abraham and the Shiv Sena are depicted as part and parcel of global capitalism's most egregious crimes against India's underclass, for example, Abraham's employment of Adam Braganza serves as Rushdie's meta-critical lament of a wayward generation. Born in the final pages of *Midnight's Children* as Saleem Sinai's illegitimate son, Adam represents his father's hope for "a second generation of magical children who would grow up far tougher than the first" (Rushdie 515). Instead, Adam pursues the capitalist dream, selling Braganza Pickles, the business owned by Mary Pereira, Saleem's ayah and only remaining family at the end of *Midnight's Children*. The company's "huge export potential" with the Indian diaspora is enough to entice him to unload the business (*Moor's* 342). Saleem views the business and its core competency of pickling as representing the importance of "the chutnification of history" (*Midnight's Children* 529) which, though necessarily distorting historical narrative, underscores the importance of India's history to its present cultural dynamics. Thus relieved of history, Adam begins to feverishly modernize Siodicorp through the installation of computers, cable, fiber-optics, and telecommunications. Moor reflects that "[t]he future had arrived" and, led by Adam, "[t]here was a generation waiting to inherit the earth, caring nothing for old-timers' concern . . . it was the birth of a new age in India, when money, as well as religion, was breaking all the shackles on its desires" (*Moor's* 343–44). Dazzled by Adam, Abraham adopts him as his second son, Adam Zogoiby (349). Yet, for all his promise as a member of India's tougher, more independent second generation of midnight's children, Adam's unabashed monetary indiscretions ultimately bring Siodicorp—and Abraham—crashing down. Initially charged with "bribing central government ministers [for] crore upon crore of public exchequer funds, with which he actually intended to fix the Bombay Stock Exchange itself" (359), Adam reveals to investigators his involvement—and by extension, Abraham's orchestration—of "vast global fraud perpetrated by the chiefs of Khazana Bank International, of the disappearance of assets into so-called 'black holes', and of its alleged involvement with terrorist organizations" (360).

Although Adam represents India's hopes for the future in the concluding pages of *Midnight's Children*, his downfall in *The Moor's Last Sigh* positions him as just another member of the corrupt urban elite.

The trajectory of Aurora's artistic career suggests a similar disconnect between artistic projects invested in the aesthetics and political valence of hybridity and the lived realities of post-Independence India. For all of the good intentions behind Aurora's artistic reimagining of India as a site of harmonious multiculturalism, Abraham's role as her primary patron creates a crisis of legitimacy for her artistic vision. Abraham's ventures undoubtedly push India in a direction opposite that of Aurora's utopian artistic dreams and deeper into violence, depravity, and the mindless accumulation of capital. Yet she seems to know it all along. Abraham's liaison with India's underworld is a necessary evil in which she is a participant: "Aurora knew," Moor reflects, that "she needed Abraham, she needed him to take care of business and leave her free for art" (223). He realizes that Aurora is not merely disinterested when she stops listening and covers her ears as Abraham boasts about his business models: "[H]ers was a chosen blindness, her complicity the complicity of silence" (107). While Adam is an active participant in Abraham's corrupt business empire, Aurora is willfully ignorant of its nature.

Even if Aurora's support network was legitimate, however, her status in the upper reaches of India's class hierarchy would likely call into question her claims as a serious artist concerned with the crises of India's social fabric. Instead, her wealth and fame allow her to enact a sort of socio-economic voyeurism in which she is free to brush up against the lived struggles of those most affected by seismic shifts in pre- and post-Independence Indian politics. During the Royal Indian Navy mutiny of 1946, for example, in which a strike and revolt by twenty thousand Indian sailors of the Royal Indian Navy against British rule was called off due to lack of political support, Aurora, "a lady with a sketchbook and a folding stool" (132), leaps driverless into her Buick and speeds for the naval base to artistically document the historical moment. She is quickly surrounded by a crowd of "frustrated young men . . . in filthy moods" and sullen about the aborted revolt, but she is able to escape, saved when she is recognized as a famous artist. Perhaps most telling is

her reply when a sailor asks her to tell her “Congress friends” that he had been let down: “I will” (134).¹⁴ Aurora’s vantage point is one of wealthy, comfortable isolation from Bombay’s street-level realities, and for much of the novel she remains in her studio in *Elephanta*, free to voice her opinions on religion, politics, and social welfare without fear of retribution.

Moor’s ability to escape Bombay just as his father’s capitalist empire begins to crumble; Adam Braganza’s rise to affluence and power within the corporate behemoth of Siodicorp; Aurora’s comfortable perch in her studio, free to pursue her art above the fray of everyday Bombay: each of these narratives, not to mention Abraham’s own “success” story, are redolent of the type of individualism and entrepreneurial freedom that characterized neoliberal policy reform in India in the early 1990s. Even Fielding’s reformulation of Hinduism is a matter of self-invention for political and economic gain. Yet each, in its own way, benefited from or exacerbated the city’s class disparities and intercultural violence that continue to inhibit the type of progress conducive to the harmonious multiculturalism envisioned in Aurora’s art and which could permit writers such as Rushdie to speak at literary festivals and travel freely throughout India.

Saleem’s prediction at the conclusion of *Midnight’s Children* continues to be legitimated in real, lived, and new ways every day, and obstacles to cultural and class progress in India apparently continue to loom large in Rushdie’s mind. Two months after the Jaipur incident, he was able to return to India to speak at the India Today Conclave 2012 where, incidentally, his attendance prompted Imran Khan, a Pakistani politician and former friend of Rushdie’s, to cancel his trip and leave a slot open for Rushdie to serve as a keynote speaker. Rushdie did not waste the opportunity to rebuke Khan, who has in the past remarked disdainfully about the “immeasurable hurt” Rushdie caused Muslims by writing *The Satanic Verses*:

In the real world, Muslims in both Pakistan and India suffer from enormous economic hardship, from bad education and shortage of opportunities. The repressive consequences of Islamic extremism on women and of mullah-driven politics on

the freedom of the citizens; these things are what Muslims actually face in the real world. And Imran Khan would do well to speak of the “immeasurable hurt” caused by these things, and not take the demagogue’s route of choosing instead to demonize a book written 25 years ago, and making its author a bogeyman with which to distract his audience from the “immeasurable hurt” of their actual lives. (“Liberty Verses”)

Though Rushdie speaks specifically about Muslims, the same could be said for India’s majority Hindu population, particularly in Bombay. Regardless, Rushdie’s sentiments remain consistent: while Muslim attitudes toward him remain largely unchanged, his address continues the critique of modern India initiated in *Midnight’s Children* and taken up in *The Moor’s Last Sigh*. The impossibility of progress, cultural or otherwise, frequently stems from suboptimal economic conditions that have and continue to exacerbate existing cultural tensions in India. If progress is to be made, if the “immeasurable hurt” caused by an irresponsible economic infrastructure and enacted against wageless life is to be ameliorated, it must begin with a focus on common plight rather than cultural difference.

Notes

- 1 Burke reports that Indian officials feared action by Ibrahim, who they believe was “closely linked to the Pakistani security establishment”; others thought, however, that an assassination was highly unlikely and that “the row was started by unscrupulous Indian politicians” in response to outcry from conservative Muslim clerics. Either way, twenty-five years after the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie remains a controversial figure in the Muslim world and continues to experience backlash.
- 2 For a thorough account of Ibrahim’s rise to power and D-Company’s continued operations, consult Clarke 46–66.
- 3 *Dirigisme* is an economic system characterized by strong state control over investment and economic planning. A concept that emerged in the post-war era to describe the French economy, *dirigisme* in India has been incorrectly understood as the crisis that necessitated structural adjustment in 1990–91. However, several argue that the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank played a key role in pushing India towards structural adjustment (Chandrasekhar and Patnaik 3002).

- 4 India's post-Independence economic policy can be distinguished from the post-war project of "embedded liberalism," an ethos designed to avoid another Depression-era downturn. State policy in many developed and developing nations was dually interested in preserving the pre-war impetus for private investment while surrounding economic process with "a web of social and political constraints and a regulatory environment that sometimes restrained but otherwise led the way to economic and industrial strategy" (Harvey 11).
- 5 For an overview of initial steps toward neoliberalism as well as the Indian economy's partial recovery in the 1980s, see Chandrasekhar and Ghosh 9–18.
- 6 For an overview of India's liberalization-era policy reform in 1990–91, see Chandrasekhar and Ghosh 19–30.
- 7 Pal and Ghosh provide a thorough overview of trends in income and consumption inequality leading up to and after the liberalization period of the early 1990s.
- 8 For an account of the normalization of unemployment against the normative category of employment, see Denning 81–86.
- 9 As Aijaz Ahmad notes, Marx's opinions on India, however underdeveloped, led him to suggest that the revolutionary rise of India's proletariat was unlikely without the prior realization of socialist revolution or reform in Great Britain (236).
- 10 Appadurai argues that deterritorialization is "one of the central forces of the modern world, since it brings laboring populations into the lower class sectors and spaces of relatively wealthy societies, while sometimes creating exaggerated and intensified senses of criticism or attachment to politics in the home-state" ("Disjuncture" 301). In the case of Bombay, the latter has been realized in the mobilization of a marginalized Hindu population by Hindu nationalist organizations for political ends.
- 11 As Patel notes, "[e]ven when income and earnings have risen, basic conditions of work and living environment[s] have not changed for many of Mumbai's citizens" and this disparity extends into access to land and housing, education, health, and environmental integrity (337).
- 12 For an overview of the criminal origins of land development in Bombay, see Weinstein 22–39.
- 13 Dohra Ahmad observes:

Aurora's painting "The Kissing of Abbas Ali Baig," a Breughalesque "state-of-India painting" . . . illustrates [the process of reductive reading] when Raman Fielding and his followers impose upon it a single, definitive anti-Hindu political reading. If we engage in so tedious a decoding as to locate a figure for *The Satanic Verses* anywhere in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, it would certainly be this painting, which becomes an ideological burden for Aurora. (12)
- 14 Scenes like this, dispersed throughout the narrative, lead Laouyene to conclude that "[r]ather than rubbing shoulders with India's downtrodden and fighting

against its caste hierarchies and class injustices, [Aurora] surrounds herself with a coterie of Bombay's sophisticated and upper-class dilettantes" (157).

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