

## The Vagabond's War Cry: the Other in Nabarun's Narrative

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Although not entirely intentional, I had a specific reader coterie in mind while writing this article. Nabarun Bhattacharya, perceived as aberrant and insignificant during the majority of his four decade long literary career has seen a sudden upsurge of interest recently. The author's untimely demise last year has, predictably, increased this curiosity manifold, because as Schiller had predicted, death is that ultimate mystique endowing the author an optimized distance: fuelling the reader's desire to *know* him. We strive for that which we know not, and death adds to that final aura of unknowability. Nabarun's novels, numerous poems and short stories are enjoying a reprinting drive partially for this reason.

Like Roberto Bolano or Thomas Ligotti, Bhattacharya always had a small dedicated audience active much before his posthumous fame. This specific group—consisting majorly of University scholars and likeminded authors and editors, was active in a scholarly engagement with his work and his authorial persona—sometimes to the point of hagiography. For the same reason, his works never exactly ceased to be printed or circulated, although many past editions are still out of print. Year 2000 onwards, his multiple award winning novels were adapted into films with moderate success; *Harbart* has been translated into several foreign languages at least twice. In other words, Bhattacharya was not popular, but never forgotten by a set of serious, critical audience. My essay distances itself from the current frenzy while targeting this particular readership. The reasons are obvious—a full introduction to or popularization of Bhattacharya's oeuvre with its prominent evolutionary stages and complexities deserves a greater scope and scholarship. I will, instead, assume the presence of an initiated audience, familiar with a rough chronology, for although I have selected a handful of texts from Bhattacharya's culminating phase, his works cannot be read in isolation. The author is unique in this—his writings follow a specific progression of thought. This is a strain dominant not only in a slow but sure induction into artistic maturity, but also a violent self-enquiry accessible only to serious readers. I will signal towards this and steer past the hagiography that followed the author's demise

Let me clear my prerogatives again — this essay is based on the culminating phase of Bhattacharya’s prose writing career (his poetry is different in its chronology and essence—it demands an axiomatic discussion), and I wish to explain how such a culmination becomes apparent in the handling of theme, style and ideology; namely 1999 onwards. Let us retrace our steps a little. Bhattacharya’s prose fiction, as it is common knowledge, willingly engages itself with the concept of recession—into poverty, atavism, primal instinct of fear, social-political margin etc. Granted, his engagement with recession is chiefly axial to another, larger, concern—politics of the margin. Throughout Bhattacharya’s oeuvre, the marginalized beings suffer socially/ financially, get trampled on or curbed in the cradle of revolution, are pushed to the point of self-destruction and nihilistic violence. At the outset, Bhattacharya seems more interested in creating a political statement than influence, and irrespective of its altruistic appeal, discussion on such a foregrounded literary ideology can be limited.

My argument treats this presumption to be faulty. I will show in this article that Bhattacharya, while acutely conscious and sympathetic of the plight of the marginalized, actually engages himself with the question of the “other.” The political (or social or financial) “other” is apparently easy to identify, and Bengali Left literature is rife with a narration of class struggle concluding in revolutionary change, but Bhattacharya’s “other” is philosophically more entrenched. Being the “other” is not a readymade, emancipator trope which automatically subverts all injustice and ushers in a better tomorrow. Bhattacharya knew this, or at least evolved into this realization. While starting his literary career with a defined revolutionary principle where the narrative will be axial to a spontaneous resistance of capitalist power play, Bhattacharya is significantly doubtful at the dawn of the millennium. The “other” can be unjust, violent, stagnant, sexist, even oppressive; but it poses a constant threat to the larger machinery that defines the line between the “normal” and the “abnormal.” Bhattacharya does not claim that even if a reversal of power occurs, the “other” shall make it alright. He is more interested in questioning. Is the question of the “other” irrevocably concluded with the reversal of power? Is the defenestration of the oppression-machinery really possible? Is the revolutionary state beyond reproach? “Who watches the watchmen?” Bhattacharya’s argument, in this phase, attempts to negotiate for an irreconcilable other who would not be, and sometimes actively resists being part of the envisioned “whole.” The risk and challenge of hearing and responding to an unequivocal

“No” is, however, far more problematic than the mere proposition allows us to understand, because the very cognition that there *is* the “other” on the threshold is made possible by *my* consciousness, the latter being coded in a grid of language and conditioning. The paradox is unavoidable—it is the subjective consciousness that enables me to cognize the role of the “other,” yet it also hinders me from even imagining such a space of negation without understanding it *in my own terms*.

Ergo, Bhattacharya moves away from the world of *Harbart* or *Juddha Paristhiti (A State of War)* or *Auto* where the marginalized dreams, resists and erupts in self-destruction with the ultimate intent of subverting the ennui. This is the phase of *Khelna Nagar (A City of Toys)*, the *Fyatarus* (the Flying Vagabonds) or *Lubdhak (Sirius)*. His trademark explosive conclusion is intact, but it does not serve any specific purpose. At most, there is rejection and fading into the dreamscape of surreal darkness. This is important and different, because living under the shadow of utter destruction—at the hand of normative oppression that curbs dissent -- dissolves polarities and makes one ponder on the transitive phase. It can create a deep melancholia as well as an intensely belligerent attitude towards the forces that say everything is normal. Here Bhattacharya consciously lets the “other” be the “other” who would, with their intricately detailed language, culture and behavioral non-patterns attack and upset the story, the raconteur and lastly, the readers. This is not to say that Bhattacharya’s narratives are a celebration of thoughtless, purposeless nihilism. His sense of transition does not mean constantly being on the threshold and avoiding responsibility, actually all the nuisance or acts of terrorism purported by his characters are targeted towards achieving a blank (\_\_\_): something Bhattacharya never specifies. This is clearly a progress, and a progress made from a very specific political awareness. This does not mean that if the blank is filled in, Bhattacharya shall sing along; he will once again critique the reverse authorial powers, again risking stasis.

We can, for example, take up a chapter from the portmanteau novella *Baby K Parijat* (January 2013)<sup>1</sup> to explore the non-recognition of the “other” which inevitably leads to an explosive “finale.” Bhattacharya does not give the characters any clear purpose or even a clear narrative in this phase: they don’t achieve anything and is not guided by any superior principle. “Change” is a vague word here, but “damage” or “upset” certainly makes more sense. *Parijat*, the washed-out,

often pathos-inducing medical representative falls head over heels for the common whore, Baby K. The famous specialty of the latter is that she has an unquenchable thirst for petrol, which she buys from several petrol pumps all over the city, directly consuming it from the pipes. Parijat is certainly a representative of the staid petite bourgeois existence, and his fascination with this outlandish prostitute (this profession is also undoubtedly a careful insertion by the author as prostitutes are largely vilified and *are* the essential “others” in an urban society) can be taken as the unstoppable urge to flirt with disaster. It is Baby K’s outlandishness that draws Parijat towards the otherwise completely unassuming short girl, and strangely enough, throughout the six chapters of the novella, Baby K sometimes lives or sometimes dies in a queer accident, sometimes stays with Parijat forever and sometimes summarily leaves him in his despair to indulge in fortune hunting. In a grotesque parody of love’s indestructible impetus and the divine figure of the Muse, Bhattacharya weaves a world where anything and everything is constantly on the threshold of possibility as if themselves indecisive whether to come to the space of “being” and “being normal.” For example, in the fourth chapter of the novella titled “American Petromax”, Parijat and Baby K are out for an evening stroll in the overcrowded Chowranghee region of Central Calcutta. In Bhattacharya’s parallel universe, Calcutta has turned into a new colony for US marines en route the military invasion of Iraq and North Korea. The whole city turns into a grotesque dreamland in Bhattacharya’s writing:

In that indulgent evening, the entire Chowranghee area was warming up to an intense sexy vibe. Parijat, along with Baby K, after feasting on dumplings sold by the one-eyed Chinaman wearing an inner vest, was happily walking towards the metro-rail stop. The sidewalks were full with the khaki underwear of US army, artificial dildo, little and cute dinosaur babies and rhododendron in bouquets—all for sale. The cloud was like a moon-catching net in the sky, the heavy drone of the military transport flights could be heard and the old bats were flying haywire. [Translation mine] (*Baby K* 53)

All of a sudden, in this perfectly “normal” ambience, several US marines throw Parijat off the track before summarily kidnapping Baby K into a notorious bar. Parijat tries his best, but he is overpowered and shunned outside the closed door and his sniveling gibberish is completely lost in the roar of the US Humvee engines. Inside the bar, the setting is even more grotesque. Thirty

seven US soldiers bodily lift Baby K on the table after making her drink a lot of whiskey, and then starts the dance—Baby K on top of the table and the thirty seven soldiers under it. Disaster strikes when in a drunken stupor a soldier suddenly offers Baby K a king-size Marlboro cigarette. Baby K, already overfed with petrol, was emitting highly flammable petrol gas from her mouth, nose and all the other orifices. Inevitably, there was an immense explosion that kills everyone within the bar, with the military forensic bureau later concluding that its intensity was equal to several Molotov cocktails.

Flirting with disaster, consuming country liquor in copious amounts in random subaltern joints while planning to unleash nihilism on the bourgeoisie society, sitting in the front row of cosmic disaster and laughing at the face of palpable danger and death—all these elements make a shattering comeback in Bhattacharya's most popular, and recently cultified pop-cultural story chain—the escapades of the *fyatarus* (the *fyatarus*, a literal English translation of which is admittedly beyond my grasp, but “the flying vagabonds” should serve as a crude alternative).<sup>2</sup> The other makes its most dramatic entrance in this special curve of Bhattacharya's narrative and over the years the famous trio of flying vagabonds—Madan, D.S. and the poet Purandar Bhat--has become sort of a cult phenomenon in Bengali intelligentsia as well as alternate Bengali culture. I will concentrate on two works here—a short story and a celebrated novel.

The short story “Kabi Shammelaney Fyataru” or “Flying Vagabonds in Poet's Convention” [my translation] is primarily focused on the author's treatment of literature-as-institution and the audience. In this story, for the first time, we are introduced to a new character—poet Purandar Bhat,<sup>3</sup> a dejected spokesperson of all the idiots of Calcutta who is almost on the verge of suicide for not getting through the stern screening process at the annual poetry convention. The flying vagabonds discover him in a completely shattered state for not having the chance to proliferate his perceived “genius” to the world, and after listening to a few “poems”—where he freely refers to obscenity, nudity, tremendous expletives against the urban bourgeoisie, irreverence to Bengali cultural icons such as Rabindranath Tagore in the crudest manner possible—D.S. and Madan readily agree to get him justice:

--We will have to go to their office. Rise, D.S. Let's go. We shall see which bastard does not let Purandar Bhat read his poetry. We will go straight from here. Shall drink a full bottle on the way, and the next destination will be the office of the poetry convention.

--Ugh, the whole thing seems like a dream to me. I feel as if somebody is whispering in my ear, Purandar Bhat, this is the way of creating history, shall go forth with my demand, shall shout with all my might, and a bit of country liquor will help a great deal...

[Translation mine] (*Fyatarur Bombachak* 80)

The point is, Bhattacharya never goes into the spiraling logic of the overlooked leftist genius in a bourgeoisie setting in his chronicles of the vagabonds. The audience is purposefully kept away from sympathizing with Purandar's plight, because it is very clear that his work holds no literary value. This, on one hand, is a clever hint of the perennial question—what is literature and literary value? On the other hand, Bhattacharya more problematically seems to be propagating the idea that the “meaningful” has run its course, the age of construction is all but over, and the role of literature is to undergo a violent paradigm shift. Expectedly, the sexy event-manager of the convention drives the vagabonds away without a second thought, prompting them to exact revenge on the whole institution in the most radical way. We are immediately introduced to the auspicious evening of the convention's gala opening, which Bhattacharya minutely describes. The NRI poets occupy the centre stage, clearly discernible from their native counterparts by their suits, shirts and Bermudas and suffering from intense flatulence right on stage because of the exotic lunch en route, comprising “crab, lobsters, cow, deer, pig, lamb, young monkey and rabbits” [my translation] (86). After the veteran poet Shyamananda Gnuin inaugurates the convention and another famous poet of yesteryears Kaliadaman Pal starts delivering the keynote speech, all hell breaks loose:

In such a hypnotic ambience, the three enormous bats flew very close to the audience and the dais and opened their respective sacks before emptying its contents—leaflets and hundreds of cockroaches. The sewer cockroaches of Calcutta are a savage and liberated lot. Throughout the day they were fighting each other being confined in the sacks. As they are released, they started flying happily...also brazenly getting into the dresses of the crowd of poetry lovers. By this sudden assault, the event manager Malatilata passes

out on the dais, and there ensues a fight between the NRI poet from Texas and France as to who will intimately escort her outside to safety. In every cacophony there are a few well hidden fortune hunters. These started nicking cameras, cassette recorders, handycams as well as wallets and purses. It was all chaos, screams and cries of agony, only punctuated by the mad laughter of three flying bats. [Translation mine] (87-88)

Before we go into the novel, one must understand that *Kangal Malshat* or *The Vagabond's War Cry* is but a potboiler for Bhattacharya, he has amalgamated all of his possible thematic strands into the form (or the lack of it) of a single story. Expectedly, this narrative does not have any remote resemblance to any extant novel in Bengali literature; even Bhattacharya's own, more celebrated novels like *Harbart* are far more cohesive and formally regular. The entire idea is a climactic battle between legions of vagabonds and the city police force, narrated through a series of expletives, crude gestures, chaotic ranting and violent threat against the life and sanity of administrative officials. The book is replete with violence, although curiously without any blood and gore, making the whole affair of death strangely comical and seemingly vapid. In the first few lines itself, Bhattacharya himself shuns the expectation of the reader with possibly the harshest rhetoric ever heard in Bengali literature. Although he is supposedly quoting the forgotten author Suresh Chandra Chakravarty with a sniding hint at Rabindranath Tagore's elitism, the very context of the quotation is significant and powerful:

"Today's readers have turned into priggish mules. For them, no writer should waste his time. Some say the readers today are impatient and pressed for time. My foot! I say, it is the author who is impatient and pressed for time." It is difficult to determine how important this quotation is as a sound logical inference. All we know is that the literary establishment can make or break an author. In today's world, no author can escape unscathed by infuriating something like, say, the Anandabazaar group. [Translation mine] (*Upanyas Samagra* 233)

Clearly, not only the reader but also the literary establishment and giant publishing houses are vilified with equal dexterity. The vagabonds are seen to be hypnotized and lured into a new vagabond kingpin's house. The godfather, Choktar Bhadi (the original Bengali linguistic analysis of this name might be too obscene to include in this article; however, Bhattacharya is using this

name to signify somebody adept at horrific rascally, with the dexterity of a lawyer) is planning to launch an all out attack against the reigning CPI(M) government of Calcutta, and he needs the assistance of the vagabonds, something the latter gladly concedes to provide. We soon come to know that it is actually Bhadi's father, an enormous talking raven, who is the mastermind of this entire operation. The vagabond party then attempts to recruit another axis of power, the mention of which in *The Vagabond's War Cry* is extremely important especially on a postcolonial level. Bhattacharya effectively jettisons all the established negative connotations of the tyrannical colonialists, before recruiting them in the vagabond's band as another set of disruptive agents. The baggage of the past does not matter to him, if the ghosts of the British can aid the vagabonds' plan with their spectral powers, even they are welcome in the merrymaking:

Cling cling cling, gallop, gallop bush and wash and a lot of creek creeks later, the vagabonds throws themselves to the side of the street. This is the famous Calcuttan "eat the air" ceremony – a polished phaeton. The coachman with an enormous turban. Looks like the governor's edicong. In it goes a fat-arsed mem sahib, vulture eyes on both sides of the road. In the opposite, two young, lithe mem sahibs. There comes, in respective horses, two sahibs in britches and baggy white full shirts. They both look up and measure the fantastic photograph of Rani Mukherji in the billboard above, then caste their lustful eyes towards the young mem sahibs. [Translation mine] (250-51)

Thus forming an alliance with both the specters of the past and the dormant agents of disruption rooted in the present, the vagabonds form an alliance whose sole purpose is to defeat and publicly malign the emasculated state government that came in power with the slogan of leftist liberation, but was slowly sucked into the vortex of authority. It is as if the entire discourse of the city—its past, preceding power relations, its formation of a new bourgeoisie, the gradual sidelining of the layered subaltern class into several orifices of the city—is vociferously rejecting the present "reality" that, Bhattacharya thinks, is far worse than anything Calcutta has ever experienced before. What will be the outcome of this radical alliance if the vagabonds triumph never comes into the ambit of the novel's discourse; because Bhattacharya's characters live in a continuum of presentness. The vagabonds cannot *win*, because the very conception of winning and subsequently ruling is not a valid option for them. Judging by the rather grim nature of



Bhattacharya's perception of reality it is hugely unlikely that the vagabonds shall ever be able to overcome the state's brute force. But it is this preference of constantly remaining at the threshold, never aiming to build an alternative empire but always acting as the aberrant elements that mock and seek to destroy every empire is what makes Bhattacharya's vagabonds one of the closest interpretations of liminal beings. Liminality is certainly not limited in high-falutin theoretical discussions, it is brought to the ground of constant radicalization and active participation in various strands of politics. Bhattacharya's greatest achievement, I think, lies in this precise moment despite his open support for ultra leftism and nostalgia for a leftist past which is hugely controversial otherwise.

The vagabonds mobilize their armies swiftly. Under Choktar's command, several unidentified flying objects scour the Calcutta night sky, occasionally beheading the top ranking officials of the detective department. Chief Minister Comrade Acharya, in all probability a not-too-subtle satirization of the then Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, is visited by the specter of Com. Stalin, which advises him to take up a much more authoritarian stance for the government. Com. Acharya is constantly criticized to be a nincompoop, and indecisive when swift action against the enemies of leftism is necessary. Bhattacharya's act of hurling abuses and unpalatable authoritarian conceptions at the presumably soft liberal audience becomes even more intense in the following pages as the psychological battle against the heads of the state comes to full swing. For example, the famous scholar and curator of the Victoria Museum is visited by Bhadi's father, the Raven. The dialogue that ensues successfully shatters several romantic concepts of Calcutta's past by offering a hugely controversial alternative history:

--Charnock was a great man. Would there be any Calcutta if he had not been there? Would there be the horse drawn trams on the eve of Calcutta's three hundred years ceremony? Where would be those magazines' special issues? Where would be those seminars? Where would be me with my august presence... along with all the ministers?

--Charnock was a great fucker. That son of a bitch came and shat beside the Ganges, and thus was created Calcutta. It is only bastards like you who worship that pathetic leech. In a country of ass, whatever the jackass says is considered to be the supreme logic. And

your government is a laughing stock. They are dicking around with Calcutta's birthday. Such is the state of your ministers. [Translation mine] (295)

The real battle starts, and before long the state power starts retreating in the face of the bizarre assault led by another vagabond, retired Major Ballabh Bakshi. Aided by none other than Mikhail Kalashnikov's strategy, Team Vagabonds starts incessant and extremely surreal shelling on the retreating force. The canon shells act in unprecedented ways—some start jumping on the car roofs, some explode to generate several minuscule shells that all rain on the force, some just remain suspended mid-air, constantly threatening of an imminent explosion. The government sends truce envoy, and the vagabonds stop their assault for further political negotiations. Before wrapping up the discussion of *The Vagabond's War Cry*, I would like to briefly refer to a couple of easily overlooked places in the novel. The first part, positioned cleverly right in the middle of the novel, briefly explores the merciless, suffocating reality of Calcutta with a very uncharacteristic sad tone, proving that Bhattacharya is ever cognizant of the plight of his life world in real life:

The smokes of air pollution endow everything with a charming mystic quality. And whenever there is a whimsical wind, several polybags start flying like the eponymous pigeons of peace... nobody has the time to look at such random supernatural events. The sole exceptions are the madmen and the house bats. They are the real friends of the Calcutta that is being broken, maimed, incinerated, melted, pummeled and disfigured in order to create a new synthetic existence. Along with the madmen and house bats, there are a few wasted girls, dogs, cats, owls, rats... mosquitoes, flies and a few last asphyxiated butterflies and moths... [Translation mine] (253)

The second part also comprises the last few lines of the novel, as the Great Raven flies from the top of the Calcutta monument in order to deliver the news to the British alliance that *The Vagabond's War Cry* has been published as a novel. Bhattacharya brings himself and his creation into his own novel in a bizarre twist of self-referentiality, signaling while it is indeed a joyful news to have an alternative voice in literature, this itself can turn into another institution without constant vigilance. What, then, is the way to escape this circularity? Bhattacharya attempts to answer in the next phase:

It was my long term plan to write a dog fable, and the result is *Sirius*. I had a deep relation with creatures like dog, cat, bird or fish from my childhood. They have given me immense pleasure and intense pain by departing prematurely. They have taught me many things which cannot be learnt by reading books. My childhood friend Gypsy influenced me greatly, and this novel can be considered a partial homage to him. The life world is not inhabited by human beings only, everybody has the right over it. In this right there lies a crucial balance of the continuous circle of life and death; this equation, if subverted, can bring great harm to the human kind. [Translation mine] (525)

Probably the most unique in Bhattacharya's prose oeuvre, *Lubdhak* (*Sirius* [my translation], published 2000) is an automatic choice for the conclusion of the culminative phase of Bhattacharya's narrative arc. The ascension of the "other" from its preordained, wretched "fate" to an explosive, negating irreducibility finds a suitable climax in *Sirius*, which is infested with the million stray dogs on the sidewalks of Calcutta. The story is neither about the unending suffering of the "other" in a normative manner nor the vagabond-esque resorting to nihilism and violence. The third phase of Bhattacharya ends with an even more important motif – rejection. This is, at the same time, a unique take on the resistance dynamics of the other, as it is an effective end of clamoring and negotiating for the same space and an exploration of something beyond, even cosmic. The philosophical underpinning is clear—growing over the politics of merging and/ or the violent friction that goes on in a spiral, this phase chooses to retain, even expand, the unbreachable distance between the "self" and the "other" as the latter moves far beyond the reach of precisely what Bhattacharya never explains. The second point is one of doubt. "Rejection" itself might amount to an innate escapism, where the "other" practically shuns violence and clears the ground for the "self." This is also important at a purely cognitive level as to recognize and respect the existence of the "other", it is important to be in its proximity, because the constant friction always shapes the idea of the "self" compelling it to negotiate and thus remind itself of the "other's" ability to say "No." *Sirius*, and its central politics, naturally continues to face similar questions. Bhattacharya, however, never shies away from the answerability or responsibility of the "self" for the "other". The primary canine characters of the novel do leave the dystopian Calcutta at the climax but they are never reduced to the docile and submissive colonized subjects. Instead, Bhattacharya shows that after the series

of pain and cruelty inflicted on them by the human beings, they have not lost their capacity to bark back or threaten to attack the human society with full force. In this way, rejection is not necessarily abandoning the struggle, it is more like taking the friction to a completely new level from where the search for newer horizons can be made, because, as Bhattacharya describes it, Calcutta is about to face utter destruction by the collision with a rogue asteroid seven hours after the story ends. In an interview with the magazine *Kabitriha*, Bhattacharya himself rejects the idea of latent escapism while talking about the philosophy of *Sirius*:

In a sense, I believe in the politics of life-world (“Pranamandal”) [my brackets]. As I reserve my right, a mosquito reserves the right to bite me. I believe in the parallel being of many. I tried to invoke these in *Sirius*. I look at the intense layerization consisting of life and consciousness. I never think that all the problems of life have been solved. Each being would raise the perennial questions in its own way. [Translation mine] (525)

With this statement Bhattacharya posits himself in a rather interesting discursive overlap. Animal literature, or animal centric/ animal rights literature is not a unique paradigm in postcolonial studies, especially, within the domain of ecocriticism.<sup>4</sup> Where Bhattacharya differs from this body of literature is in his treatment of the animal characters not as a foil or extension of the existential dilemma faced by the human protagonist, but the removal—however incomplete-- of the hapless canines from the space of human cognition altogether. In other words, Bhattacharya’s animals attempt to construct the niche of perfect strangeness: an othering which creates and maintains an essential distance from the self by its unique language and other methods of articulation, while never foregoing the unending friction with the polarized “self”, and within itself. Granted, the animals cannot speak for themselves, and a question can be raised whether animal sympathizing, in Bhattacharya and beyond, is just a device of endowing the self an unbridled agency in speaking for the “other.” This limitation is certainly there in Bhattacharya, although he is using the animals as the symbols of othering, his sympathy for them is certainly very much his “own.” Added to this is Bhattacharya’s recurrent motif of an ever incumbent explosion or annihilation that endows his animal-centric stories, especially *Sirius* an undeniably militant yet hopeful vibe. Bhattacharya deftly handles several complex things in parallel—conflict, redemption, rejection and revolutionary hope—trying not to take sides or concretizing

the image of the forthcoming. *Sirius* always remains on the threshold, operating within liminality.

*Sirius* starts with a foreboding countdown to the zero hour—the moment of Calcutta’s destruction. Making frequent references to astronomy and pagan mythology, Bhattacharya opens his novel with a temporal play—the seven hours to annihilation never ends as the entire story is narrated through present continuous. Every moment becomes timeless in *Sirius*’ opening page, as the reflection of uncountable stars, asteroids, nebulae and galaxies are reflected on the lifeless eyes of a random, dead puppy. From the squalid, throttling reality of rotting dog carcasses to the fantasizing of the icy vastness of space beyond is what forms the aforementioned “big picture” of this novel:

The rain is playing an essential part in decomposing and bloating the dead dogs, along with the sun, sultry air, flies, rats and bacteria. See, the dead puppy that was born and dead at the same spot; its eyes still unopened... see, the ants have eaten away the postnatal layer over its eye, thus helping him to finally see. That small, and dead eye is too insignificant, glassy too. Now see, the thing that is reflected on that eye, is called the space. That single dead eye, like a dead glass is capturing the Milky Way, the galaxies departing elsewhere... many asteroids, comets and lifeless mechanical satellites... look at the south eastern side of the Orion. You can see Canis Major. It is the extreme beautiful brightest star of the night sky. It is called Lubdhak or Sirius...It has given its verdict. It cannot be revoked. But we have seven hours left still. [Translation mine] (384)

The first chapter is full with such sporadic, yet interconnected philosophical snippets, not signaling towards a concrete story. In an almost cinematic style, Bhattacharya’s vision widens to reveal heaps of dog carcasses lying all over the out of order stable strewn throughout Calcutta. The heaps of dead bodies consist of all forms of canines domesticated, half domesticated, pregnant, young and old, belligerent or docile or simply stoic. This macabre vista is interspersed with the constant reminder that these bodies will lie inert for the next seven hours, the seven hours that are never passed in the course of the novel. On the one hand, this denotes the continuing suffering of the dogs, on the other it makes us stop in the brink of something with

cosmic importance, constantly deferring the climax, allowing us space to laboriously reach and project what it should be.

The next few chapters can be divided into two strains. In this phase, we have a semblance of a concretized narrative, which initiates through the three instances of random cruelty inflicted on stray dogs in Calcutta, which in turn serves as the initial point of a lengthy and meandering dialogue between several stray dogs and cats that reveals the real nature of systematic animal cruelty by the metropolitan authority and a subsequent bigger “change”, something the animals can sense but cannot define. We meet three characters of the novel—Ear-sprout, Whitish and Brownie, all victim of deadly or semi-deadly and unnecessary assaults by human beings. Whitish does not survive the onslaught of a speeding car, but both Ear-sprout and Brownie survive long enough to witness the intricately planned dog annihilation program, unleashed by the city on the brink of the millennia. Several ingenious ideas of ridding the city of dogs in the name of extensive beautification are introduced then rejected for logistical difficulties before zeroing in on covertly kidnapping the dogs and throwing them, sans food and water, into the unused stables. While this planning takes place inside the heavily guarded chambers of human authority, the dogs and cats of the city talk among themselves, all scared of the impending doom, a news first secretly served by the crows. The animals talk of their past and plan for the bleak future, while their comrades are ceaselessly caught and thrown into the stables. In the overall gloom, another stray called Gypsy brings the news of an impending paradigmatic shift that, apparently, cannot be stopped:

--Within two days we will have to leave the city. Something deadly is about to happen. What precisely I cannot tell. The moment the word is spread, we shall leave this city in scores. You better join us. Ear-sprout has also requested the same.

--So you say it is better to leave?

--Whatever I have heard till now, that is the impression. Come down. Let's go.

--Well, but what is this deadly event?

-- It's all a rumour. Some say it will be a war. Some say an earthquake. It might be something coming out of the beyond in order to save the dogs. Nothing can be stated specifically. Let's go, we will tell you the rest on the way. [Translation mine] (404)

While this discussion is ongoing, Bhattacharya's gaze shifts to the cosmic machinations occurring somewhere deep inside the cosmos. The humans discover through telescope and other sensors that an immense asteroid is on a collision course with earth, originating from the Canis Minor. Bhattacharya's imagination takes us straight into the legion of "shadow-dogs" ethereal, mythological and divine bodies flying over the Bay of Caninus. While zooming through the clouds, Laika, the spirit of the iconic Russian astronaut dog addresses Anubis, the dog faced guardian of the netherworld of Egyptian mythology. They engage in a discussion of when precisely to strike, and how far the dogs' exodus shall proceed by the time the attack is initiated. Their concern is answered by the repeated statement—"There are still seven hours to go. [Translation mine] (414)" The dogs in Calcutta, meanwhile, suddenly abandon their commotion in the black holes of the abandoned stables, and sit in strange formations as if to welcome the canine faced asteroid, approaching like judgment from the cosmos. As the elderly dogs engage in strange pagan dance, and their claws emit sparks from the friction with the stone floors, the city authority, now in throes of consternation and panic, opens the gate of the stables, the elders do not budge, but the small dogs and puppies leave with their mothers, halting traffic throughout the city pouring from every corner:

The huge buildings, feet covered in merciless boots, the wheels of a raging car ... these, that instill layers of fear inside us, that make us understand that it's us who are the weaklings—all of these are now silent, cornered and still. Woof! Woof! We bark in small voices. Yes, today we control it all... we are leaving ... We leave in stride. You may guard your assets in this cursed city we rejected, like blind Golems... Your cruelty, ignorance, greed, callousness are all coming back to you like boomerangs... if the police sergeant moves one bit, his feet will hit us and he will never ever reach home tonight. All the trucks ... beware! Your wheels must not move an inch, for this placid, vast, sea of canines might turn into a gaping shark... Woof! Woof! [Translation mine] (412)

The traffic goes into a complete standstill, and the headlights are suddenly doused as if several giants going blind all at once. The police and other guardians of law and order cannot move from their place, witnessing hypnotically the great exodus of puppies. Several dogs cannot escape after all as many died already due to starvation and thirst, but those that leave make a unique point in Bhattacharya's oeuvre. We never know what they are leaving for; if the apocalypse is worldwide it is clear that mere displacement would not be enough for the survival of any of the dogs. Bhattacharya also refrains from stating whether the "new" place would be a canine utopia devoid of all layerization. It is this act of leaving, the act of struggling to find something "other" than the regular that takes us back to the trident of philosophical cores at the heart of this thesis. The struggle for the utopia is there, the machination of an inert and mysterious singularity can be felt through the cosmic intervention, but at the same time it is the essential "other" that seemingly makes these paradigms a possibility. It is through the dynamics of the "other" space that such possibilities stand a chance to be realized.

In tandem with the basic principles of the transition of otherness, I intentionally use the term "seemingly" and "chance" as Bhattacharya never allows us to comfortably settle in a space, and to look back, ruminating and making meaning of whatever came to pass. This is also relevant in the context of the "self" and the "other," because the self's continual effort to signify the "other" according to its own cognition is unequivocally thwarted in this narrative, pushing the novel to a dangerous brink. The world is a series of continuities, made clear by the dialogue between dogs and cats in their nocturnal procession: as one dog asks where exactly they are going and if it had been better if they had known the exact location of the place, the feisty cat answers that there is no space, all they have to do is to move further, and beyond. They leave behind the relic of a decadent human civilization that is Calcutta, a space that cannot escape a natural order of annihilation and possible rebirth at any cost. The humans shall suffer in their grimy caves while the animals actively struggle to make a change and look for a better future. Yet, even this finality is given a timeless vibe through the last lines of the novel:

The savage dog that has been let loose in Calcutta is coming towards its target with a speed of a hundred thousand kilometers per hour. We cannot precisely tell its dimensions and weight at this moment. The mad dog shall slam on Calcutta and will evaporate but



the abyss created by the impact will be ten times wider than the dog itself and twice as deep. Stone particles worth a hundred times its weight shall be strewn all over the ether. After the first impact of the collision, there will be no air for a few seconds. The whole city shall smolder. Right after shall come the size of a million storms. Calcutta shall burn, melt, perish and turn into ashes. After this, the dust particles shall blot the sun. For how many days, that wintry night shall persist, nobody can foretell... Chanting this merciless foretelling, the dog fable *Sirius* has reached its conclusion. Calcutta is now an inert, awaiting stable. Its punishment is death.

But there are still seven hours to go. Woof! Woof! [Translation mine] (416)

Bhattacharya, perhaps one can assume, goes through an evolutionary arc in his grappling of the concept of the “other.” Although I have concentrated chiefly on the last phase where the author presents the “other” as a belligerent agent of chaos, a thorough reading of his oeuvre shall make clear that he slowly removed himself from the linear assumption that once the marginalized assumes the power, all shall be equal forever. In this article, I have tried to explain how Bhattacharya does not thrust any emancipatory role on the “other” but lets them speak freely while being on the margin, posing a greater challenge and a more intense threat to normative powers—thematically and linguistically. Bhattacharya leaves the rest for the reader to judge.

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> A little aside is important here regarding the title of the novella. In Bengali, the sound K? (*ke*) is a form of question directly identical to “who?”. In here, however, K means “to” as in a form of address. This way *Baby K Parijat* might mean from Parijat to Baby. And as explained later in the main argument, Baby K also doubly serves as the eponymous heroine of the story, in which case, the work K can be taken as an abbreviation of “khanki,” a colloquial and extremely impolite synonym of “whore.”

<sup>2</sup> “*Fyat*” is an onomatopoeic prefix, and anybody with primary conceptions of Bengali should know that this word generally signifies the flapping sound of a bird’s wing in flight. *fyataru* hence becomes an extremely colloquial signifier of something that flies. Obviously enough,

Bhattacharya's "*fyataru*'s are flying humans who flap their hands, while chanting their fail-safe mantra: "fnyat fnyat shnai shnai"—"flippety flop flippety flop, swishy swish swishy swish."

<sup>3</sup> *Bhat* is a semi-archaic word in Bengali, given a twisted colloquial pun in Bhattacharya's writing. Archetypically, a *Bhat* is used to describe a minstrel, but the word gained a popular connotation especially in the post 90s Bengali urban class which generally meant "talking bullshit." For reasons that are discussed in the main body of the argument, the poet Purandar takes up his surname to signify both the meanings—he is an urban bard as well as somebody whose poetry makes no sense.

<sup>4</sup> Ecocriticism, especially in close relation to postcolonial perspectives, has produced several seminal works regarding natural elements as the "others"—in counterpoint to an overly machinistic human civilization. Pablo Mukherjee, Graham Huggen, Franco Moretti or Kylie Crane have produced important works regarding environmental postcolonialism, ethics, transcultural world literature and the postcolonial animal.

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