

Binayak ROY
University of North Bengal
Siliguri, India
binayak_roy@hotmail.com

**SOUTH ASIAN VILLAGE AND THE (IM)POSSIBILITY OF UTOPIA.
TARASHANKAR BANDYOPADHYAY'S *THE TALE OF HANSULI TURN***

Recommended citation: Roy, Binayak. "South Asian Village and the (Im)Possibility of Utopia. Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay's *The Tale of Hansuli Turn*." *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory* 8.2 (2022). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24193/mjcst.2022.14.08>.

Abstract: Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay's *The Tale of Hansuli Turn* depicts a utopic, autochthonous, and indigenous rural community, the Kahars, in a state of transition. The marginalized community is certainly not a homogeneous and monolithic one, there are stratifications in professional identities; women are forced to migrate to be employed in workshops or rail-line employment. The airbase and airplanes during World War II signify offstage imperial and existential catastrophe. The narrative celebrates change and subtly sympathizes with the rebel Karali, who has embraced the gospel of development and is a harbinger of radical change, returning to Hansuli Turn, with the promise of a new beginning after the destruction of the old order. A "New Hansuli Turn" is born after negotiations with the colonial order. Unlike many other postcolonial texts, *The Tale of Hansuli Turn* re-conceives the present by re-telling the past without being nostalgic. Its vision of the future is a transformation of the present.

Keywords: utopia, heterotopia, space, myth, critical utopia

A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realization of utopias.

– Oscar Wilde, “The Soul of Man under Socialism”

From this ‘no place’ an exterior glance is cast on our reality, which suddenly looks strange, nothing more being taken for granted. The field of the possible is now often beyond that of the actual; it is a field, therefore, for alternative ways of living.

– Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*

Utopia, Heterotopia and Space:

“Is there still any space, whether conceptual or practical, for the thinking of utopia”, ask Michael and Vieira, “in a world marked by a chronic dystopian outlook” (Marder and Vieira ix)? More than a century after what Nietzsche diagnosed as “European nihilism,” dystopia has cemented itself as the “current *Weltanschauung*”; it is “a lens through which we filter historical reality” (ix). The sheer impossibility of an alternative community, based on an annihilation of the darkest traits and tendencies prevalent in the contemporary world, leads to apathy and resignation in contemporary theoretical precepts. A perfect manifesto, for Michael and Vieira, of an all-encompassing dystopia is Herbert Marcuse’s 1964 book *One-Dimensional Man* that contextualized the flattening, impoverishment, and integration into a paralyzing totality of every sphere of life and human activity. However, the substantial progress in the economic, social, scientific, and technological domains that have characterized the world in the last quarter of the 20th century, asserts Franco de Sá, creates “fertile ground for the cultivation of new utopias or for the rebirth of what could be called a utopian way of thinking” (de Sá 23). It is as a conjecture of a possible way of life in human terms that utopia acquires its distinctive character.

The concept of utopia for de Sá is based on a “description of something that does not exist, as an exercise in imagination unrelated to the reality of what ‘is’, but, although not immediately connected to the reality of what ‘is’, it is, nonetheless, related to reality as a projection of what ‘should be’” (24). It is this intrinsic allusion to what

“should be” that inevitably binds utopia to a new reality that potentially should come into being. Utopia’s inherent allusion to “being,” or, more precisely, to the “not impossibility of life as described in utopian terms” (24), contextualizes Karl Mannheim’s distinction of utopia from ideology: “they are not ideologies, i.e. they are not ideologies in the measure and in so far as they succeed through counteractivity in transforming the existing historical reality into one more in accord with their own conceptions” (176). In a similar vein Arnhelm Neusüss does not give utopia the meaning of something unreal, but of something real, in the sense that utopia denies the reality which factually unravels before it: “It is not within the positive determination of what it wants, but in the denial of what it does not want, that the utopian intention becomes concrete. If reality as it is known is the denial of a possibility of something better, therefore utopia is the dissent to this denial” (Neusüss 33).

Utopia is conceptualized to be the representation/projection of a society that finds its own location in the future. It therefore exists as an idea that could guide the construction of a world yet to be realized. The offshoot of such a line of thinking is the concept of a world with the dissolution of all spatial boundaries, the space of which is entirely unified and interconnected. The spatial dimension is perfectly juxtaposed with the temporal one which projects utopia into the future transcending the demarcating line between the known time, the “now”, and the time which breaks away from it and develops beyond it. “If the reference to space (a space that is nonetheless possible) gives utopian thinking its essential link to reality” contends de Sá (de Sá 27), the dimension of time lends utopia its central meaning: the possible transformation of the future of humanity (27). Thus far from being the projection of a fantasy or mere wishful thinking, utopia is defined by a decisive connection to effective reality: not to a material reality but to a reality to be constructed and reinforced factually on the basis of an anticipated future opened up by utopian thought itself.

“Existential utopia”, assert Marder and Vieira, is “precisely this theoretical practice, re-signifying the lifeworld of a community and enabling the formation of a new world” (Marder and Vieira 36). In Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, Dasein reacts with shock to the deficiencies in the totality of its world and a total breakdown of previously established meanings. For Heidegger, argue Marder and Vieira, “re-signification becomes possible where something loses its secure, preassigned place in the totality of significations, triggering a sense of meaninglessness and confusion that clear the space

for the emergence of new meanings” (Marder and Vieira 38). The sense of displacement and dislocation initiates existential utopia with the realization that the world one inhabits is imperfect, or, in the words of Novalis, that “Die Welt ist der *Inbegriff* des unvollkommenen Lebens” (“The world is the *essence* of an imperfect life”) (Novalis 72). It commences in an *ex-topia*, in an estranged space, where the world turns uncanny and where Dasein’s whole being is overwhelmed by the anticipation and fear of its death. Everybody “lives in the future”, asserts Ernst Bloch, “because they strive, past things only come later, and as yet genuine present is almost never there at all” (Bloch, *Hope*, Vol I, 4). He believes that the world, and humanity in it, is unfinished and humanity’s sole legitimate task is the completion of the world (Bloch, *Function* 73) and therefore ourselves: “the world is untrue, but it wants to return home through man and through truth” (Bloch, *Spirit* 279).

Bloch discarded More’s *Utopia* as a social experiment and widened the scope and concept of Marxian utopianism. A passionate believer in the possibility and necessity of social change, Bloch optimistically advanced a philosophy of the being’s incompleteness, which constantly projects the humans forward orienting towards the Not-Yet-Become. Bloch departs from Bergson who “has not only ignored creative anticipation, this reddening dawn in the human will, but the genuine *Novum*, i.e. the idea of the new as a whole, the horizon of utopia” (Bloch, *Hope* 202). Human beings position themselves through the *Novum* and rethink the nature of their existence to form a precise direction of utopia. Bloch enunciates a metaphysics of *the new*, a metaphysics of a utopia where the incompleteness of being makes it prone towards its own incompleteness and potential newness. What is more, “the dialectical emergence of this total content is no longer described by the category *Novum*, but rather by the category *Ultimum*, and with this of course the repetition ends” (Bloch, *Hope* 222). The “*Ultimum*” represents for Bloch the last, i.e. the highest newness, the repetition intensifies to the last, highest, most fundamental repetition: of identity (Bloch, *Hope* 223). A creative anticipation of the arrival of fulfillment can resolve all the contents of an *Ultimum*. This explains Bloch’s eulogization of the artist who is able to experience and depict a now, a present, which has a subtly different tenor: it is a mediated “now” (Bloch, *Function* 208). The artist conceives a world which is unreified, unalienated, and undistorted by the relations engendered in capitalism. Hence he rehabilitates the utopian tradition and utopia as a mode of being.

Like utopia, heterotopia is a place/space which has the property of being outside of the society which produced it, while at the same time carrying a relation to all the other remaining, “external” spaces. Foucault suggests in *Different Spaces* that heterotopias are real “actual places, places that are designed into the very institution of society, [...] all the other real emplacements that can be found within the culture are, at the same time, represented, contested, and reversed, sorts of places that are outside all places, although they are actually localizable” (Foucault, *Different* 178). Unlike heterotopias, utopias “reside only in a spatial and temporal ‘no-place’” (178). Foucault, not unsurprisingly, dismisses all utopias – “from communes to communism” – as utopian, “thoroughly fantasmatic” (Foucault, *Other* 20) and looks up to heterotopias as “something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (20).

“The principle of *function* connects heterotopia with utopia in interesting ways”, explains Anupama Mohan, that “gestures towards a conceptualization of ‘rural heterotopia’ that Foucault himself does not pursue” because his exclusive focus was on urban space (Mohan 14). Mohan takes up from this premise to comprehend the recent turn towards reconceptualizing the rural in twentieth-century South Asian writing. Here, conjectures Mohan, Foucault seems to suggest that “heterotopias (‘counter-sites’) and utopia (‘certain colonies’) are *when functioning as compensatory social structures* one and the same” (14). Foucault’s thought aligns him with Bloch whose idea of ‘abstract’ utopia which is compensatory, fantastic wishful thinking without any possibility of transformation. Contrarily, concrete utopia is anticipatory and looks forward to a real attainable future. It is not wishful but will-full thinking: “There is never anything soft about conscious-known hope, but a will within it insists: it should be so, it must become so” (Bloch, *Hope* 147). While Bloch’s idea of abstract utopia “may express desire”, neatly distinguishes Levitas, “only concrete utopia carries hope”: “Concrete utopia embodies what Bloch claims as the essential Utopian function, that of simultaneously anticipating and effecting the future. And not all dreams of a better life fulfil this function” (15).

In the postcolonial context, the function of utopianism is “to open up a space for political action that is buoyed up by the possibility, indeed, the probability of social change” (Ashcroft 10). Bloch designates this possibility as “concrete utopia.” The ideal way to provide it a concrete shape is to redirect the “language of critique” into “the

language of the possible”, the “utopian language of liberation without the necessary insistence of resolution” (10). This entails entering the area of “continual *negotiation* rather than conclusive *negation*” (10). “All utopias” for Ashcroft, “are critical because their focus is the present, the distinguishing feature of all utopian visions being the critique of those present conditions that make utopia necessary” (10) which is intrinsically interwoven with the dialectic present in imperial history between liberation and coercion, desire and its oppression.

Gandhi’s concept of community as a ‘little republic’

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj* presents his conviction that the ancient Indian civilization is an epitome of true civilization. It was so because the people of ancient India exhibited tremendous restraint against luxuries and pleasures, extolled rural life, advocated a strong ethical sense, curbed ruthless competitions and preferred small-scale technologies. Although modern India has deviated a long way from these core “Indian” values people in the sub continental hinterland still practice them. Gandhi believed that the Indian village embodied a more authentic social reality, a purer form continuously ravaged by colonial and capitalist forces:

Our cities are not India. India lives in her seven and a half lakhs of villages, and the cities live upon the villages. They do not bring their wealth from other countries. The city people are brokers and commission agents for the big houses of Europe, America and Japan. The cities have cooperated with the latter in the bleeding process that has gone on for the past two hundred years (Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 21¹ 288–89).

Gandhi’s Utopian model of village self-rule, or *swaraj* was to be a village self-sufficient with its own food crops and cotton for cloth, its own system of water supply and education, without any tinge of casteism. Gandhi’s reiteration of the village as a ‘little republic’ effaced the brutal realities of the caste system, poverty, and illiteracy, in order to create it anew on Utopian lines. He claimed this village republic as traditional as well as indigenous: “Indian society was at one time unknowingly constituted on a non-violent basis. The home life, i.e. the village, was undisturbed by the periodic visitations from barbarous hordes” (*CWVG* 71 4). In his perceptive essay “Remembered Villages”,

¹ Henceforth abbreviated to *CWVG*

Dipesh Chakrabarty articulated the country/city dualism in Bengali literature which represented the village “as an ideal and an idyll” (125), an image of the pastoral, “a place, true, marked by suffering, poverty and sometimes a meanness of spirit but yet the abode of some very tender sentiments of intimacy, innocence and kinship” (123). These perspectives offer fresh insights to engage into the (im)possibility of utopian visions in *The Tale of Hansuli Turn*.

The Tale of Hansuli Turn: an embodiment of rural heterotopias and critical utopia

Does a village exist in reality? Or is it merely a construct of sociologists and others who are forever looking for an ideal type of a simplified social structure which provides an easy universe for investigation? Are the characteristics of the village essential to define it conceptually? And, if so, what are those characteristics? – Arvind N. Das, *Changel: The Biography of a Village*

Colonial theorists conceived the South Asian/Indian village as a static space resistant to change. Sir Charles Metcalfe, for example, remarked in a Minute for the Select Committee of the House of Commons on the Affairs of the East India Company that “India’s village communities are little republics, having nearly everything they want within themselves, and almost independent of any foreign relations. They seem to last where nothing else lasts”. “Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down”, in such a space, “revolution succeeds revolution, but the village community remains the same” (cited in Ludden 161). Marx argued in a similar vein that “these self-sufficing communities that constantly reproduce themselves in the same form, and when accidentally destroyed, spring up again on the spot and with the same name” (393). While earlier researches conceptualized a theory of primitive communism of property based on systems of revenue collection and land ownership, twentieth century studies focused on the cultural life of the villages. This is not simply a South Asian but a global phenomenon. No village is an island unto itself, economically or culturally. As Renato Rosaldo argues, “[i]n contrast with the classic view, which posits culture as a self-contained whole made up of coherent patterns, culture can arguably be conceived as a more porous array of intersections where distinct processes cross from within and beyond its borders” (Rosaldo 20). At the theoretical level, this constitutes the notion

of “hybridity” as a synonym for diversity or multiculturalism – the once primeval, separate, and distinct cultural orders are now beginning to meet in the context of migration.

Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay’s *Hansuli Banker Upakatha* (1946-51), translated by Ben Conisbee Baer as *The Tale of Hansuli Turn*² (2011), narrates the life of a village in rural Bengal which experiences modernity thrust upon it by the forces of war in the mid-twentieth century. It has at its core the life of a hugely hybrid and socially mobile marginalized community known as the Kahars. The Kahars are a living example of the changing social identities impacted by a deep interplay between the traditional caste system and colonial interests, whereby social mobility for them is never upward but latitudinal. They are depicted not only as marginalized by the caste system but also as criminalized and exploited for furthering the interests of the colony and then treated as pariah by the dominant system for their licentiousness. They are extremely differentiated and diverse as a community with deeper stratifications in their professional identities, which make the whole texture multilayered.

The Rarh, the spatial location of *THHT*, is an embodiment of post-structuralist space with a palimpsest of differentiated human and natural activity existing in a state of perpetual tension. In the narrative, space is represented as a domain of political and cultural encounters, encounters which actually shape the connection of different characters with territory and location. Hence, space is represented as a dynamic arrangement between people, places, cultures and societies. James Clifford argues that “space is never ontologically given. It is discursively mapped and corporeally practiced” (54). According to Clifford, space is composed through movement, produced through use, being at the same time an agency and the result of action or practice.³ The entire geographical location of the Rarh at the Turn is neatly mapped with cartographical divisions as if it were a stratified terrain of Euclidean space:

Within the river girdle, surrounded by the thick bamboo groves of Hansuli Turn, the settlement of Bansbadi occupies about one hundred acres inside the ward of Jangol. North of Bansbadi, on the other side of a few small paddy fields, lies Jangol village. Bansbadi’s a small village. Around the four sides of two ponds are thirty or so Kahar huts. Genteel society in Jangol village – potter Sadgops, farmer Sadgops, spice-merchant caste homes, as well as one barber-caste and two weaver-caste houses. Jangol’s

² Henceforth abbreviated to *THHT*.

boundaries are broad; maybe one and a half thousand acres of good cropland, and lots of fallow too – about a hundred and fifty acres of it abandoned on the Saheb Tracts that used to belong to the English indigo planters (*TTHT* 3).

But, “Euclidean geometry is not true in the real world” (Smolin 41); and that “space is not what we once thought it was”: it is not absolute, isotropic, three-dimensional or independent of the objects it contains (Greene 123). There is no separate space and time at all but only spacetime, a unified medium of the universe. It is a rhizomatic, intricately interwoven domain “[W]here one stream comes and joins from, where the flows split and go – can’t tell”; “[R]iver with no end, no beginning, like the Milky Way in an autumn sky” (*TTHT* 4-5). An emblem of dynamic space it is an apt illustration of the Foucauldian concept of “heterotopias” which represents “the space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our times and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us” (Foucault, *Other* 23):

Hansuli Turn’s an altogether different kind of place. Hansuli Turn’s a place of iron-willed earth. If it’s “parchtime,” the height of cruel summer, that is, the river dries and turns to desert, sand as far as the eye can see – on one side water no more than knee-deep somehow trickles along [...] Then earth becomes stone. Grass shrivels away, earth heats up like forged iron [...] (*TTHT* 5-6).

Human history enmeshes with geographical features in the Rarh to create the image of a total organism, a composite being that conforms to the postulates of post-structuralist new geography’s emphasis on “heterogeneous relations” between “natural and social and the human and the non-human” helping “human geographers to reach across the human-physical divide” (Murdoch 3).

“Somewhere in our societies, and in ours alone”, asserts Latour, “an unheard-of transcendence has manifested itself: Nature as it is, ahuman, sometimes inhuman, always extrahuman” (Latour, *Modern* 98). However, Latour also insists that modernity never really achieved the separation of nature from culture to which it aspired: “Furthermore, the very notion of culture went away along with that of nature. Post natural, yes, but also post-cultural” (Latour, *Gaia*30). Ashis Nandy quite aptly conceptualizes that the Indian imagination “uses non-dualist thought to impose order on diversities, contradictions, and oppositions, and a unified worldview on a fragmented society” (62). *TTHT* implies that the ghosts represent polyphonic voices

which provide alternative viewpoints and a deeper understanding of life than possessed by humans:

As one generation ends, so the ghost-souls bound to it by obsession or hatred find release; then with each new generation, new dead souls – caught by something, obsession or hatred, they flit in Bansbadi shadows – on Kopai banks, through trees' thick cover, in Hansuli Turn fields. The borderlines of Hansuli Turn's nonhuman world stretch far – from sky to earth, from ghost folk to mortal folk (242).

In its reference to a missing object, loss can transform into nostalgia or a “utopian politics in quest of a new totality or fully unified community” (La Capra 698) when it is conflated with a conception of absence. He asserts that “[S]omething of the past always remains, if only as a haunting presence or revenant” (La Capra 700-701). La Capra's prescription to work through the dialectics of absence and loss, and thus to produce “a condition of possibility of historicity” (729) echoes Derrida's injunction to learn to “live otherwise, and better” by learning “to live with ghosts,” and his insistence that a history conceived as spectral would necessitate a reflection of how the past is both absent and present within the “now” and also how the past opens up possibilities for the future (Derrida xviii). The Rarh thus manifests a spatial paradigm and a temporal continuum.

A site of polysemous layers, the Rarh is a zone of contact between multiple cultural, national, and religious communities. “There is no village in India, however mean”, asserts Raja Rao in his Foreword to *Kanthapura*, “that has not a rich *sthala-purana*, or legendary history, of its own” (Rao v). The Rarh, too, has its *sthala-purana* or spatial history, the legend of Babathakur and Kalarudra, the guardian gods of the Kahar community. The names of these indigenous gods seem to have been distorted from the pantheon of Hindu mythology but these subalterns repose ultimate faith in them and their immanence: “Father Kalaruddu – Kartathakur's overseer – Babathakur's Father. Just as sage “Larada” came forth from “Larayan,” Vishnu, so did shavenheaded, ochre-wearing, clog-clad, staff-in-hand Babathakur come from Kalaruddu. Karma at Lord's wish, by Kalarudra's decree” (*THTT* 143). The overarching figure of ‘Baba Thakur’, the embodiment of religious ethics, controls the actions and behaviours of the Kahars. He is conceived to be a determining mechanism that has to be kept pacified through blood sacrifices if norms are violated. The monstrous python

that Karali slaughters right at the beginning of the novel is his emissary and Karali's murderous act is a violation, in terms of Bonwari's cosmic and moral strictures, which triggers the action of the novel. Bonwari, the headman, believes in karma or the actions from the previous life and supports changelessness. Responsibility for this old man means a complex relationship of loyalty and subordination to the quasi-feudal masters of the village, and adherence to the prescriptions of gods and ancestors. True to his nature, he opines that Karali's heinous act has "brought in the Infernal Age" which initiates the dialectic between two orders of faith: "although the youths, the maids, the young wives of the Infernal Age are all transfixed by this, the elders cannot bear it" (*THTT* 98). Such is the nature of the Kahar's belief system that each event is reinterpreted in terms of divine intervention. The decline of the indigo plantation of the British coincided with the arrival of a great flood on the river Kopai which set the folk imagination in motion:

Folk say Saheb and his Missus were washed away in that same flood. But what Auntie Suchand said, that was the real story. That's the story Bonwari believes. Mister Saheb and his Missus were sucked down by a whirlpool for ignoring Lord's word. Otherwise, Saheb, Missus – how could such folks who'd come sailing across the Seven Seas get drowned in a Kopai flood? Lord's game, Lord's ruse, all of it. Master Chaudhury didn't just get the bounty of God's grace, he got the saheb Company's entire property for a song. Karma of Lord's will (21-2).

"Living" a myth entails a genuinely "religious" experience elevated from the mundane, everyday existence. The "religiousness" of this experience is due to the fact that "one re-enacts fabulous, exalting, significant events, one again witnesses the creative deeds of the Supernaturals; one ceases to exist in the everyday world and enters a transfigured, auroral world impregnated with the Supernaturals' presence" (Eliade 19). The mythical events are hence not only commemorated but also reiterated and re-lived.

The essence of myth lies in repetition, not change. What it implies is that through the re-enactment of the myth one jumps out of linear or chronological time and lives in the primordial time. The mythical figures become contemporaneous with the present and all temporal divisions are dissolved:

To re-experience that time, to re-enact it as often as possible, to witness again the spectacle of the divine works, to meet with the Supernaturals and relearn their creative lesson through all the ritual reiterations of myths. In short, myths reveal that the world, man, and life have a supernatural origin and that this history is significant, precious and exemplary (Eliade 19).

As a “vital ingredient” of human civilization, myth thus “expresses, enhances and codifies belief; [...] safeguards and enforces morality; [...] vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man” (Malinowski 101). Not unsurprisingly, the “*upakathā*” or “tale” of the novel’s title resonates throughout the novel to convey the somewhat folksy sense of “tale,” to emphasize the interrelationship between the subnarrative, the novel (“*upanyas*”) and history (“*itihās*”). Suchand Kahar, the oldest woman resident of the Kahar community and the main custodian of its narrative, hands the tale to the novel’s narrator at the end highlighting the timelessness of the narrative: “Sonny, ‘eard it when I were a kid. [...] This tale’s gonna end wi’ me, yeh. But if ya can, keep it in writin’” (*THTT* 372). That the narrative enters an epical and historical dimension is underlined at the end with the 1943 flood, when written records were archived, “the tales and settings of numberless other places were [...] washed away, were transformed. History certainly does not obey Lord’s word, Kalarudra’s whim, Hari’s directive. It says – contingency, coincidence. Let it speak – be truth what may; the Kahars will call it true and obey” (*THTT* 369). The narrative interweaves oral cultures of myth/folklore with written historical records. Myth/legend thus narrates a sacred history. The tension between knowing and not knowing is a key quality of heterotopia that occurs when there is, as Foucault puts it, ‘a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live’ (Foucault, *Other* 21). This dialectic between different modes of imagining and representing India’s oppressed indigenous tribe forms the central texture in the narrative.

The Kahars were stereotyped by colonial ethnographers as a “criminal tribe” and classified as a “backward” caste. They are migrants, displaced from an unknown place, and thrust in the Turn by the demands of colonial capital and settled there for generations. Brought to the indigo plantation as palanquin bearers and bodyguards, they now toil as sharecroppers in fields owned by the Sadgop gentry.

The real meaning can be found in the old papers of the Chaudhury house. All those papers have now almost disappeared, devoured by termites. There are still a few whole bits and pieces in piles of termite-eaten paper. [...] the sahebs dig a pond there and turn all Bansbadi's wasteland to indigo cultivation. It's in order to do just this that these folk of Kaharpara come to Bansbadi. Many people had come. Among them, a few of these Kahars put cottages here (*THTT* 19).

They are thus erstwhile migrants who have settled on this *topoi* in a period of collective transformation. Despite the hold of customary law and tradition upon them, the Kahar community is anything but ageless and unchanging. They have been engaged in various professions as befits this autochthonous tribe ranging from armed guards and palanquin bearers, landless sharecroppers for the needs of the indigenous landowners, to finally wage laborers in the small-town wartime industries. This rural space also witnesses the stratified layers of caste segregation ranging from peasant farmers (Sadgops and Mondols), landlords, landowners, and rural gentry (Ghoshes, Chaudhurys, and unnamed Brahmin gentry) and to the landless sharecroppers eking out a living in village or country town. It thus dismantles the notion of the idyllic pastoral, idyllic rural India of Gandhi's imagination.

Migration is certainly not a thing of the past but it continues unabated even in contemporary times in the narrative:

So many women left home to work construction on this line – Panchi, Khuki, Bele, Chitto, Nimmla. Khuki and Bele left the locality – with two Muslim stonecutters. Chitto and Panchi went off with a Hindusthani line mechanic. And Nimmla took off with another mechanic. Karali was that Nimmla's son. The bitch even went off leaving little five-year-old Karali (*THTT* 89-90).

The two protagonists, Bonwari Kahar and Karali, represent two generations in conflict. While the stoic village headman Bonwari accepts and lives by the standards bequeathed by earlier generations and upholds the status quo, Karali, the robust vitalist, is a harbinger of change and resists stasis and stagnation. Between these two lie a multitude of characters belonging to both Kahars and the Sadgops, living life with gusto with their individual tragedies, loves, and happinesses. The narrative gradually builds up a dialectic between the static older generation and the more adventurous youth who respond to the fresh challenges and opportunities offered by colonial rule

and wartime profiteering, between “dharmic wisdom” and “worldly wisdom” (*THTT* 234). Life for the older folk is “the slow-paced life of a foot soldier walking the fieldpaths” (*THTT* 78). Immersed in “a brawl culture” (*THTT* 76) and bucolic pleasures, the elder community lived a life of satiety given over to cosmic interpretations of anything which for them meant transcending the boundaries imposed by deities:

If you couldn't fill your belly from the paddy, beans and pulses, vegetables and herbs of these meadows, then where in the world could you fill it? If he who plows and digs this land can't fill his own belly, then you have to realize there's an unseen fault, effect of karma from a previous birth; a punishment, taken out on soil or body, for the twisted mind of this birth (*THTT* 245).

Bonwari, the representative of the older generation, is completely indifferent to the war and the airplanes hovering overhead. For him, the Kahars survive by worshipping Kalaruddu and Babathakur and “[W]hat do the good and bad of the world have to do with Hansuli Turn”? (*THTT* 246).

Karali's individual enterprise clashes with the values of the village's elders and the indigenous landlords. As the go-between between the rural and the urban worlds, Karali develops a hybrid, cross-fertilized identity. Sagacious and practical, he realizes that his success depends on understanding the rules of the colonial structure and playing the role of a colonial lackey. When the railways were established at Channanpur, the value of the gentry's land rose, trade and business expanded, and let loose a fresh trail of migration. The “new wave [...] war's wave” (*THTT* 188), the aircraft and the airbase, despite signifying an imperial and existential disaster and the heralding of a dystopic realm, become emancipator for a subaltern community. The war disrupted the economic system of Bengal in many ways, including its concentration of a privileged workforce in Calcutta and other cities. The network of supply and demand collapsed under the impetus of the profit motive. Free enterprise, in the form of speculation unchecked by a corrupt state government divided against itself and an indifferent British Raj, was the main cause of the Famine. “Rice which ordinarily flowed in non-commercial exchanges between cultivators and their dependents”, explains Paul Greenough, “began to veer into the commercial channel, and a much larger proportion than usual of the stored rice supply fell into the hands

of outsiders” (212). There was speculation on all sides ranging from the humblest cultivator to the richest Marwari merchant in Calcutta fattening himself on every kind of business generated by war. Human greed for money cruelly dissolved the web of unenforceable obligations binding landlord to peasant, essentially feudal in nature, leaving the peasants starved. Prices of rice soared in no time compared to other food items and soon they become unaffordable.

While Bonwari refuses to transcend the feudal strictures and prefers to serve the upper-class gentry, the Sadgops and the Mondols, Karali dares to dismantle the norms. He takes a job in the wartime rail workshops, actively recruits the villagers to do likewise, and informs them about the abuse and insults of the rural landlords and the injustice of caste segregation:

Oo’s got caste? Any lad’s dad got it ’ere? That old Suchand’s sittin’ there, let ’er say, let ’er say, I’m listenin’. Caste! None o’ you’s got no shame! Pure castes – gentryfolk, ye lick their feet, they take yer livelihood, take yer caste. Beat yer backs wi’ shoes, ya put up wi’ it in silence. Shame! Washin’ yer faces at the riverside o’ shame, are ya? Caste! [...] I’ll get work fer ooever’ll labor in the workshops. Five bits wages a day. Company’ll give cheap rice, cheap soup, cheap cloth. Ooever wants can come. Don’t abide by that oldie’s word (*THTT* 322).

Rustic feudal hierarchy is gradually being overturned by the world of wage labor and British military structure. The forest of the Turn is cut down by wartime timber contractors, the spatial dichotomies of the village and the city are to be connected with tarmac roads, and the shrine of Babathakur is replaced with a motor car garage. This intricate relationship between war, empire and capitalism destroyed the ecology of the Turn by “wiping out the seep shade of bamboo groves, banyan, and peepul” trees (*THTT* 360). Although the narrator emphasizes that the “pull of the world’s lifestream, the lifestream of this time’s people mixes with history’s course” (*THTT* 359) is beyond the imagination of “the brain of vast-bodies Bonwari, dull-brained human of Hansuli Turn” (*THTT* 359), the open ended nature of the narrative makes the reader ponder that the colonial project is not entirely a benediction. Bonwari laments the large-scale exodus of the village-folk allured by the fruits of industrialization and the resulting emptiness of the cottages and the demise of an indigenous way of life: “War has made the Kahars forget their cow tending and milk selling; it’s wiped that business out” (*THTT* 367). What is more, there is also a mention of the dehumanizing forces of

capitalism which takes the lives of children who are “not worth counting” (*THTT* 362). Yet, as the Shakespearean fool like Pagol sings “*He who creates, bro, he destroys; he who destroys, creates*” (*THTT* 372). The narrative ends with the rebel Karali, who has embraced the gospel of development and a harbinger of radical change, returning to Hansuli Turn, with the promise of a new beginning after the destruction of the old order, a “New Hansuli Turn” (*THTT* 373) born after negotiations with the colonial order.

Postcolonial thinking “thus turns away from imperial utopia”, claims Ashcroft, “by reconceiving the present, specifically the place *of* the present and place *in* the present” (10). Unlike many other postcolonial texts, *The Tale of Hansuli Turn* reconceives the present by re-telling the past without being nostalgic. Utopianism, says Zygmunt Bauman, “must engage in a significant polemic with the dominant culture” (Bauman 47). Moylan’s concept of “critical utopias” which “dwell on the conflict between the ordinary world and the utopian society opposed to it so that the process of social change is more directly articulated” (Moylan 10-1) is relevant in this context. He uses the word “critical” in the “Enlightenment sense of *critique* – that is expressions of oppositional thought, unveiling, debunking, of both the genre itself and the historical situation” (10, italics original). Hence, it offers an alternate way of being in the present, resisting the forces of history with its transformative vision. The essence of humanity, after all, is hopefulness: “human longing in both forms – as impatience and as waking dream – is the mainsail into the other world. This intending toward a star, a joy, a truth to set against the empirical, beyond its satanic night of *incognito*, is the only way still to find truth” (Bloch, *Spirit* 206).

The Summing Up

Joan Gordon compellingly argues that colonialism itself is predicated on just such a utopian vocation: “The utopianist colonizer first seeks to annihilate the contamination of difference [. . .] by dismissing the value of the Other and refusing to allow that difference expression” (Gordon 210). In this sense, utopianism, rather than marking the eradication of difference in the form of the Utopia itself, is recast as a desire for difference from the neoliberal Utopia of global capitalism as a total and seemingly closed system. Drawing on postmodern theory and Foucault’s concept of heterotopias, Ralph Pordzik argues that there is a long and far-reaching tradition of postcolonial authors who “have participated in a project of cultural decolonization characterized by

the gradual displacement of approved forms of utopian representation, based on narrative and epistemological closure" (168). Instead, these authors draw on and present through their texts a series of "heterotopian alternatives, constructed on principles of cultural diversity more appropriate to the heterogeneous nature of postcolonial cultures" (168). In this sense, a postcolonial utopia would not be associated with closure but is instead imagined as a horizon beyond late global capitalism and its neoimperialist world-system as an opening up of possibility.

References:

- Ashcroft, Bill. *Utopianism in Postcolonial Literatures*. Routledge, 2017.
- Bandyopadhyay, Tarashankar. *The Tale of Hansuli Turn*. Translated by Ben Conisbee Baer. Columbia University Press, 2011.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. *Socialism: The Active Utopia*. Homes and Meier, 1976.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
- Bloch, Ernst. *The Principle of Hope. Volume 1*. Trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight. MIT Press, 1995.
- . *The Spirit of Utopia*. Translated by Anthony A. Nassar. Stanford University Press, 2000.
- . *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*. Translated by Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg. MIT Press, 1989.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "Remembered Villages: Representation of Hindu-Bengali Memories in the Aftermath of the Partition". *South-Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. XVIII, Special Issue, 1995, pp. 109-129.
- Clifford, James. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Harvard UP, 1997.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. Routledge, 1994.
- Eliade, Mircea. *Myth and Reality*. Trans. Willard R. Trask. Harper & Row, 1963.
- Franco de Sá, Alexandre. "From Modern Utopias to Contemporary Uchronia". *Existential Utopia: New Perspectives on Utopian Thought*. Continuum, 2012, pp. 23-34.
- Foucault, Michel. "Different Spaces". 1967. *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault Volume 2*. Ed. J. D. Faubion. Penguin. 1998, pp. 175-186

- . "Of Other Spaces". Dehaene and de Cauter, 1969, pp. 13-39.
- Gandhi, Mohandas K. *Hind Swaraj*. Ed. Anthony J. Parel. Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- . *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India, 1980.
- Gordon, Joan. "Utopia, Genocide and the Other." *Edging into the Future: Science Fiction and Contemporary Cultural Transformation*. Ed. Veronica Hollinger and Joan Gordon. University of Pennsylvania P, 2002, pp. 204-216.
- Greene, Brian. *The Fabric of the Cosmos: Space, Time, and the Texture of Reality*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2004.
- Greenough, Paul R. "Indian Famines and Peasant Victims: the Case of Bengal in 1943-44". *Modern Asian Studies*. Volume 14, Issue 02, April 1980, pp 205-235.
- LaCapra, Dominick . "Trauma, Absence, Loss," *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 4, 1999.
- Latour, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Harvard University Press, 1991.
- . "Waiting for Gaia: Composing the Common World through Arts and Politics". *What is Cosmopolitical Design? Design, Nature and the Built Environment*. Ed. Albenya Yaneva and Alejandro Zaera-Polo. Ashgate, 2015.
- Levitas, Ruth. "Educated Hope: Ernst Bloch on Abstract and Concrete Utopia". *Utopian Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1990, pp. 13-26.
- Ludden, David. *The Agrarian History of South Asia: The New Cambridge History of India, IV*. Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw. *Myth in Primitive Psychology*. 1926. Rpt. in *Magic, Science and Religion*. Anchor, 1955.
- Mannheim, Karl. *Ideology and Utopia* . Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976.
- Marder, Michael and Patricia Vieira. "Utopia: A Political Ontology". *Existential Utopia: New Perspectives on Utopian Thought*. Continuum, 2012, pp. ix-xv.
- . "Existential Utopia: Of the World, the Possible, the Finite". *Existential Utopia: New Perspectives on Utopian Thought*. Continuum, 2012, pp. 35-50.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Volume I – Part 1. The Process of Capitalist Production*. (1867). Cosimo, 2007.
- Mohan, Anupama. *Utopia and the Village in South Asian Literatures*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

- Moylan, Tom. *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*. Methuen, 1986.
- Murdoch, Jonathan. *Post-Structuralist Geography: A Guide to Relational Space*. Sage Publications, 2006.
- Nandy, Ashis. *Return from Exile: Alternative Sciences, Illegitimacy of Nationalism, the Savage Freud*. Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Neusüss, Arnhelm, "Schwierigkeiten einer Soziologie des utopischen Denkens." *Utopie: Begriff und Phänomen des Utopischen* . Ed. Arnhelm Neusüss. Luchterhand, 1968, pp. 13-122.
- Novalis. *Fragmentos de Novalis* . Lisbon: Assírio e Alvim, 1992.
- Pordzik, Ralph. *The Quest for Postcolonial Utopia: A Comparative Introduction to the Utopian Novel in the New English Literatures*. Peter Lang, 2001.
- Rao, Raja. *Kanthapura*. 1938. Rpt. OUP, 1989.
- Rosaldo, Renato. *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*. Beacon Press, 1992.
- Roy, Binayak. "Reading Affective Communities in a Transnational Space in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*." *Nordic Journal of English Studies*, December, 2015.
- Smolin, Lee. *The Trouble with Physics: The Rise of String Theory, the Fall of a Science, and What Comes Next*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006.