

# Allegorizing Neoliberalism: Contemporary South Asian Fictions and the Critique of Capitalism

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## Abstract

What is neoliberalism? This essay tries to answer this question by drawing upon two sources: theoretical discussions and literary representations. Michel Foucault and Wendy Brown argue that neoliberalism is best understood as a new logic of governmentality which has brought into being a new economic subject, *homo oeconomicus*. This article, positioning itself against the main tenets of Foucauldian theories of neoliberalism, argues that a normative logic of governmentality is an inadequate frame for understanding neoliberal capitalism. In order to understand the contemporary moment better, we need to historicize neoliberalism and look carefully into its relationship with capitalism and class. What we also need to factor in is how a monetized consumerist worldview has normalized itself in neoliberal culture. When we read contemporary South Asian fictions allegorically, these normalized worldviews and masked relationships begin to come into view. Allegorical presentations of neoliberalism in fictions, this essay hypothesizes, have often taken two different paths: representation of it as a structure of feeling, and parody and critique. A number of contemporary fictions including Samrat Upadhyay's "The Good Shopkeeper" and Amitav Ghosh's the *Ibis* trilogy can be read as neoliberal allegories thematizing not only the material alterations that neoliberalism has ushered in but also the cultural transformations that have become parts of our everyday life.

**Keywords:** allegory, capitalism, Foucault, Marx, neoliberalism, South Asian fiction

## Introduction

The idea that contemporary South Asian fictions can be read as neoliberal allegories was perhaps first advanced by Betty Joseph, who, in her essay "Neoliberalism and Allegory," argued that Aravind Adiga's novel *The White Tiger* (2008) should be read as an allegory of neoliberalism because it satirizes India's neoliberal development by placing the rhetoric of economic development in the mouth of a murderer who attains his entrepreneurial success through violence (72). Since its publication, Joseph's essay has attracted both hostile and favorable responses, exposing, in the process, the difficulty of carrying out an allegorical reading without risking passionate contestation. Both Snehal Shingavi and Swaralipi Nandi, for instance, have questioned Joseph's claims about *TWT*, especially about the efficacy of reading it as a neoliberal allegory (Nandi 278; Shingavi 5), whereas Alexander Adkins and Sundhya Walther are appreciative of Joseph's nuanced reading of Adiga's novel, using

her work to fortify their own assumptions about it (Adkins 170-71; Walther 597). Responses to Joseph's essay, thus, demonstrate how neoliberalism itself is understood differentially by scholars who remain divided about how best to conceptualize it. But, simultaneously, these responses also signal the risk of engaging in allegorical reading, because what is allegorized in a text remains open to interpretation. Not only is allegory itself deeply dialectical, but also the process of carrying out an allegorical reading is intrinsically ideological. In the words of Marxist thinker and cultural critic Fredric Jameson, "allegory itself is allegorical" (*Allegory and Ideology* 1).

The etymology of the word "allegory" suggests a Greek origin. Conjunction of two different expressions – "allos" (other) and "agoreuo" (to speak openly, or to speak in an *agora* or marketplace) – allegory implies the articulation of something "other" than what has been said (Mucci 298). Northrop Frye writes in *Anatomy of Criticism* that allegory is "a structural element in literature" and cannot be added to a work by "critical interpretation" unless it is there (54). Jameson, expanding the horizon of Frye's hypothesis, goes further, suggesting, "everything is allegorical" and "all allegory is utopian" (*Allegory and Ideology* 215). Such a broad understanding of a category, especially when it comes from Jameson, needs to be taken in with a pinch of caution. A relentless dialectician, he also notes how structural relations manifest themselves not in the broad spectrum of philosophical abstraction but in "fragmented social life," for the universal as such is never available in its abstract totality to subjects for cognition and interpretation (*The Political Unconscious* 290). The "Utopian" in the political struggle, therefore, is an expression of the "unity of a collectivity" – inscribed in shared dreams and visions – which allegorical readings often strive to unearth (290).

The proposition that I advance, extrapolating from Jameson who hypothesizes broadly about allegories and their relationships to literature, is less ambitious. This essay advances readings of four contemporary South Asian fictions – a short story and a trilogy – to argue that they symptomatically represent the vicissitudes of neoliberalism, especially the economic worldview's relationship to subjects and objects. Neoliberalism is approached in this work dialectically, as a set of economic policies emerging out of core capitalist beliefs and ideologies, and as a culture that not only imposes normative values on all objects but also produces subjects who internalize such normative worldviews. Neoliberalism's historical emergence has been made possible by a fortuitous (for those who are on the side of capital) historical windfall – the withering away of the Keynesian state because of a tenacious economic crisis in the early 1970s, and the fall of the socialist block in late 1980s and early 1990s. In the absence of any meaningful opposition, either political or cultural, it has established itself as the only possible worldview (*Weltanschauung*), saturating institutions, and impinging on relations and systems that were previously left outside economization's clutch. Therefore, instead of seeing neoliberalism as a new modality of subject production, which many Foucauldians do, this essay, following

David Harvey, Prabhat Patnaik, John Bellamy Foster, and other Marxists, posits it as a dialectical process engaged, on the one hand, in the production of an inherently uneven world (spaces, institutions, policies, and nature) mirroring capitalism's own unevenness, and, on the other, in the reproduction of subjects who see their own interests entangled with the interest of neoliberalism. This essay also contends that as the historical dominant of our era, neoliberalism has given rise to a specific kind of culture whose effects on the polity and the collective imaginary can be traced in the monetization of affect, the fetishistic disavowal of the global ecological crises, a complicit endorsement of uneven development, and the unquestioning acceptance of capitalism as the only possible lifeworld.

Literary apprehension and representation of neoliberal capitalism and its culture has in general taken two different directions that, rather than being two different visions, are indeed two historical modalities appearing in succession: the path of anticipation of it as a structure of feeling, as a precognition of the emergent; and the path of satire and critique of neoliberalism's local/global manifestations. A number of Bangladeshi fictions written in the 1990s – Ahmed Sofa's *Gavi Bittanto* (1995), Akhtaruzzaman Elias' *Khoabnama* (1996), and Shahidul Zahir's *Abu Ibrahim Mrittu* (written in the mid-1990s but published in 2008), for instance – exhibit prescient alertness about the ascending neoliberal world order, whereas many novels written in the twenty-first century – Aravind Adiga's Booker winning novel *The White Tiger* (2008), Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke* (2011) and *Flood of Fire* (2014), Mohsin Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2011), and Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), to name a few – ring a pessimistic alarm about the way neoliberal policies and culture affect the fabric of life. This essay draws upon both forms of representations of the neoliberal to explain how such representations are expressive of something more fundamental and foundational, namely, the struggle of labor against the normative conditioning of the lifeworld by neoliberal capital.

Although this essay predominantly focuses on neoliberal conditioning of life and society, it does so by taking into cognizance the contestations against neoliberalism as well, by advancing the notion that many of the contemporary cultural productions are positioned against it. Indeed, this essay's fundamental premise is built up on the foundation of its conjecture about contemporary South Asian fictions' critical apprehension of neoliberalism. Despite the worldview's dominance in state policies, institutional operations, education, and culture, many of these works remain astutely opposed to the manner in which neoliberalism affects society and the planet. In what follows, this essay offers a theoretical overview of neoliberalism, explaining why the subjectivist descriptions of neoliberalism are deeply flawed and require serious revisions. Then it offers short readings of those fictions that either thematize the neoliberal cultural shift, or critique neoliberalism's oppressive policies. The readings of contemporary literary works as neoliberal allegories afford us vantages into the objective conditions in which the neoliberal subjectivity is

formed, thus implying that a subjectivist theory is inadequate to take account of neoliberalism. Drawing upon contemporary fictions from South Asia, this essay shows how, instead of merely pointing towards the capitulation of the subject to neoliberal conditioning, these works stage allegories of the subject's resistance against neoliberal ideologies and institutions. What this essay also considers is the relative reluctance with which postcolonial academics address the questions of capitalism and class – the fundamental parameters of neoliberal logic of economization. The general tendency of Foucauldian and postcolonial academics to discuss neoliberalism without sincerely engaging with the question of class is, if not a marker of their outright complicity, certainly a symptom of their alienation from the very subjects and sites they claim their familiarity with. This essay, therefore, turns towards the issue of obfuscation of class and capital in its concluding section, explaining how such omissions are symptoms of a “cynical reason” marked by defeatism and compromise (Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* 413).

### Neoliberalism and its Critics

The origin of the word neoliberalism remains clad in mystery. While most studies point towards the small gathering at the Walter Lippmann Colloquium in 1938 as the place where the term was first used to define a thought collective (Foucault 132; Henry 547), other thinkers place its origin way back in the 1920s when the word's German equivalent began to circulate in Europe (Plehwe 10). There are also a handful of scholars who credit the German Ordoliberal School, specifically Alexander Rüstow, for first using the expression (Chari 21). Not only is the origin of the term relatively vague, its historical emergence likewise is opaque. Although neoliberalism is the historical dominant of our era, very few people, very few academics indeed, seem to have taken proper notice of it. As the effects of neoliberal policies lie in full visibility, to be seen publicly all around the globe, its being and *modus operandi* remain obscure as if its specter-like existence is the only thing that is real about its presence. Noting how the obscurity of its origin as well as its purpose has allowed neoliberalism to silently carry out its business all around the globe, George Monbiot, in *The Guardian*, writes the following:

Imagine if the people of the Soviet Union had never heard of communism. The ideology that dominates our lives has, for most of us, no name. Mention it in conversation and you'll be rewarded with a shrug. Even if your listeners have heard the term before, they will struggle to define it ... Its anonymity is both a symptom and cause of its power. (“Neoliberalism”)

Instead of revealing neoliberalism's inconsequentiality, as has been pointed out by Monbiot, its anonymity attests to its power and normalization. The hegemonic, Gramsci made us understand, normalizes itself as common wisdom. That entrepreneurial visions such as privatization, profitability, commoditization, and relentless self-promotion now seem commonsensical and uncontested, persuasively point towards the direction of neoliberalism's hegemonic presence in the culture

we live in today, lending credibility to Monbiot's observation that neoliberalism's anonymity, instead of gesturing to its weakness, asserts its hegemony.

Part of the anonymity of neoliberal thought can be attributed to its ruling class origin, its curtain walls separating it from public views. As a movement, it has always enjoyed generous support and endowments from the business community, especially large corporations (Plehwe 11). In that sense, it has been the favored child of the prosperous and the wealthy since its emergence. Friedrich von Hayek, the predecessor of today's neoliberals, was the son of a physician father and an aristocratic mother who came from a land-owning family. His Mont Pèlerin Society was mostly comprised of old-school liberals and US academics from prosperous backgrounds, whose views, much like his own, were conservative and anti-working class. Hayek's works in the 1940s and 1950s provided the theoretical foundation for Milton Friedman, George Stigler, and James Buchanan to base their economic research on the former's conjecture about the relation between market economies and personal freedom. Most of these early proponents of neoliberalism vigorously propagated that freedom of the market will warranty freedom of other kinds (Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* 2-4). Friedman, who William Ruger describes as "as a unifying force and leader of economists on the Right" (168), regularly appeared on television and radio programs to disseminate the view that privatization was the only way of ensuring freedom (Friedman, "Free to Choose"). Yet, unlike other libertarians (extreme right wing thinkers) of his era who felt that use of force was tyranny, he argued that it was not morally reprehensible to use brutal force to establish markets and expand the horizon of capitalism ("Take it to the Limits"). That in the 1970s, he and his "Chicago Boys" advised not only General Pinochet, the brutal dictator of Chile, but also dictated some of the most oppressive policies around the world (Sanders, "The Failed Prophet") testifies to his utilitarian and self-serving disregard for other people's freedom to choose.

For more than two decades since the founding of Mont Pèlerin Society in 1947, neoliberalism remained marginal in economic policy making, mostly circulating in some of the most elite universities in the United States, most notably the University of Chicago. It was the economic crisis of the 1972-1973, and the political crises in Latin America and Asia in the 1970s that allowed neoliberalism to gain a foothold in the mainstream policy making (*Duménil and Lévy* 21; Radice 94-95). The restlessness and crises of the 1970s in the United States and the United Kingdom brought Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Regan to power, who, aided by economic advisors, eager themselves to try out the same neoliberal policies that were tested in Latin America, began to liberalize their countries' economy and impose strict control over organized labor (Harvey, *Brief History* 39-49). The fall of the socialist block in 1989-1991, the expansion of US imperialism around the globe in the 1990s, and the implementation of IMF and World Bank market reform policies in the Less Developed Countries (LDCs) allowed neoliberalism to spread across the planet (*Brief History* 48).

Although neoliberal ideologies have gained traction with a large number of people – even among those whose lives have been squashed by neoliberal policies – today it is increasingly critiqued by many who see it as a threat to society and equality. Academic criticism of neoliberalism in recent times have been launched from two camps mainly: Marxists who believe that neoliberalism is predominantly a phase of late capitalism marked by “financialization” (Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism* 24), “accumulation by dispossession” (Zamora “When Exclusion Replaces Exploitation”; *Spaces* 43), and naked imperial ambition (Foster, “The New Imperialism of Globalized Monopoly-Finance Capital”); and, Foucauldians who contend that neoliberalism can be best understood by the phenomenon of the arrival of the *homo oeconomicus* – the economic subject who declines to submit to the jurisdiction of the sovereignty of the state (Foucault 283) and approaches “everything” in transactional terms, “as a market” (Brown 39).

The governmentalist approach to neoliberalism, where neoliberalism is seen as the moment of arrival of a new economic subject, is culled from Foucault’s lectures at the Collège de France in 1978-1979. After long editorial interventions, Foucault’s lectures from 1978-1979 were finally published in the original French in 2004 and in English translation in 2006. Its publication in English marked a decisive moment in global literary culture because Foucault’s ideas were immediately picked up by a number of academics and intellectuals, most notably by Wendy Brown, who began to argue that neoliberalism is not merely a set of economic policies but also a new governmental logic that seeks to undermine democracy. Brown’s arguments were instituted on Foucault’s observation that “neo-liberalism” advances a new kind of subject, *homo oeconomicus*, who threatens the foundation of juridical power – the power of the sovereign – by negating the sovereign’s right to control “the economic field” (Foucault 292). Foucault’s discussion of the economic subject’s relationship with the juridical system is deeply insightful. That he anticipates the catastrophic outcomes of the introduction of economic logics in other fields governed by their own sets of laws is demonstrative of his grasp of what is at stake in neoliberalism’s circulation and proliferation.

Characteristic of his implicit but nevertheless foundational critique of Marxism, Foucault’s conjectures about neoliberalism’s disinclination to submit to any logic of governmentality other than the one ushered in by the market, however, is devoid of any discussions on class relations. Indeed, right at the beginning of his hypothetical considerations on neoliberalism, where he introduces “German neo-liberalism” (129) or the Ordoliberal School, Foucault dismisses the conventional wisdom about neoliberalism by claiming that those who argue that neoliberalism is a second-hand theory borrowed from classical liberalism, or see it as a set of state policies propelled by the desire to establish a market society, do not at all contribute much to the theoretical understanding of neoliberalism (130). The French post-structuralist’s reference to “Book I of *Capital*” (130) leaves little doubt that the hidden object of Foucault’s critique is Marx and not neoliberalism. His emphatic proclamation that

“what I would like to show you is precisely that neo-liberalism is really something else,” is, in essence, a rejection of conventional left wisdom about neoliberalism that saw it, first of all, as a set of derivative theories borrowed from “laissez-faire” and, secondly, as a “generalized administrative intervention by the state” to ubiquitize “market relations in society” (130). This new interpretation, advanced by Foucault, posits neoliberalism as a new logic of governance, invested in the idea of shaping the state according to the principles of market economy. To put it in Foucault’s parlance:

Neo-liberalism is not Adam Smith; neo-liberalism is not market society; neo-liberalism is not the Gulag on the insidious scale of capitalism ... the problem of neo-liberalism was not how to cut out or contrive a free space of the market within an already given political society, as in the liberalism of Adam Smith and the eighteenth century. The problem of neo-liberalism is rather how the overall exercise of political power can be molded on the principles of a market economy. (131)

The French theorist thus situates neoliberalism in the thick of political ontology, suggesting that the real issue surrounding neo-liberalism is not its relation to capital but its disinclination to submit to the juridical right of the sovereign. In other words, what is problematic about neoliberalism is that it seeks to mold the state according to the principles of the market economy, thus subjecting the sovereign state to the mastery of the market. Foucault’s observation, it needs to be stressed, appears extremely insightful when one looks at it from the standpoint of governmentality. Neoliberalism does indeed impose on the state the logic of economy. Nevertheless, his tacit criticisms of certain tenets of neoliberal thought notwithstanding, Foucault exhibits little interest in tracking the political and economic consequences of the encroachment of economic reason in every sphere of life; nor does he notice that the desire to expand economic laws beyond the social boundary of the economic is underwritten by the desire for accumulation of capital and political power not simply as individuals but also as a class. What is equally problematic is that he does not even factor in capitalism in his broad consideration of economization, whose sublation of politics he flags as a dangerous propensity. Foucault’s reluctance to specify what kind of economic relations feed into the neoliberal desire for the economization of the juridical/political leads him to hold the entire realm of the economic culpable of impinging upon other social/political/cultural/juridical domains, thus erroneously suggesting a separation between economy and other spheres of life. Just as Foucault’s general theory of power in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* led him to the amorphous theory of power (Said, “Foucault and the Imagination of Power” 241-42), so his general theory of economization of the juridical lands him on a subjectivist theory of neoliberalism incapable of specifying what kind of relations produce the *homo oeconomicus* and why. Foucault’s subjectivist theory of neoliberalism, therefore, is established on an undialectical foundation which fails to notice how the birth of the *homo oeconomicus* takes place in

an overdetermined but contested universe where the economic subject is not merely a bearer of the neoliberal inscription but also is an active agent struggling against its dictates. That Foucault fails to foresee any resistance against the totalizing will of neoliberalism, that he empties the neoliberal world of any contestation, especially class contestation, speaks volumes about the shortfalls of his subjectivist construct.

Much like Foucault, who shows little interest in the question of class struggle in his cognitive mapping of the neoliberal, so Wendy Brown exhibits little concern for the actual sites of oppression and exploitation in her book *Undoing the Demos* (2015). For Brown, what is most important in the meteoric rise of neoliberalism is the question of the arrival of a “normative reason” that has the potential for becoming a “governing rationality” (30), and not the reorganization of space and society according to the expansionist logic of neoliberal capital. Although, unlike Foucault before him, Brown acknowledges the significance of Marxian critiques of neoliberalism, she nevertheless persists with the idea that the most productive way of understanding it is through the modality of subject formation. Explaining why she prefers the Foucauldian frame over the others, she writes:

In contrast with an understanding neoliberalism as a set of state policies, a phase of capitalism, or an ideology that set loose the market to restore profitability for a capitalist class, I join Michel Foucault and others in conceiving neoliberalism as an order of normative reason that, when it becomes attendant, takes shape as a governing rationality extending a specific formulation of economic values, practices, and metrics to every dimension of human life. (30)

For Brown, then, what is of importance is the phenomenon that neoliberalism, when it becomes a governing rationality, expands its horizon beyond the economic and exerts its tentacular presence in “every dimension of human life.” Both Foucault and Brown, it seems, are particularly alarmed by neoliberalism because it has the ability to spill over to other domains of human life and sublate those into its own expanding horizon. Following Foucault, she too identifies the “*homo oeconomicus*” as the embodied manifestation of neoliberalism. What is novel about our era, she maintains, is that “we are everywhere *homo oeconomicus* and only *homo oeconomicus*” (33). Unlike the figure of the same in the eighteenth century, today’s *homo oeconomicus* is distinguishable for its desire to govern “itself [as] a firm” (34), specifically “as human capital across all spheres of life” (35). When “everything is capital,” she writes, “labor disappears as a category, as does its collective form, class, taking with it the analytic basis for alienation, exploitation, and association among laborers” (38).

Brown’s taxonomy of the human capital, thus, leads her not only to drown out all forms of class solidarity but also dissent. If all of us are indeed living breathing human capitals, solely invested in self-promotion and transactional relationships, there is no



room in our consciousness and society for transgressive and self-negating activities. As capital embodied, our only destiny is to compete with other human capitals, seeking to exert our domination in the mix those who have internalized the same worldviews. Brown's understanding of neoliberal capitalism exclusively through the lens of subjectivity, thus, obliterates the boundary between the dominant and the dominated, proffering a sweeping subjectivist philosophy that flattens out the line of demarcation between labor and capital.

It is easy to notice how figures like Afaz Ali, the protagonist of eminent Bangladeshi writer Akhtaruzzaman Elias' short story "Kanna," undermine the type of subjectivist hermeneutics that Foucault and Brown advance in their works. Although Ali is constantly forced to think of money, to the extent that his efforts to earn money look desperate, his reasons for doing so are not bound to his desire for self-enrichment. As the objective world around him succumbs to the culture of profiteering, his desire remains simple: escaping his entrapment in his workplace – a graveyard located in the city of Dhaka where he is a petty *moulvi* – and returning to his family who reside far away from the capital city, in rural Bakerganj. A subjectivist theory of neoliberalism, the kind that has been advanced by Foucault, Brown, Huehls and Chari, fails to account for Afaz's desperate pursuit of money, for what motivates him to earn money is not his desire to become successful – to become entrepreneurial and advance his knowledge for self-enrichment, thus becoming a human capital – but rather the necessity to escape the trap of debt. In Elias' story, what leads us to neoliberalism is the transformation of the objective conditions of subjection, not mere changes in the protagonist's subjectivity. It is the material relation between labor and capital as well as the emergence of the monetized culture that offers us a better theoretical handle on the effects of neoliberalism.

Likewise, when we read Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* as an allegory, what swims into view is not merely the protagonist's grotesque emergence as an entrepreneurial subject, a human capital, but also a deeply divided India where the structural relations simultaneously produce immiseration of a large number of citizens and the enrichment of the view. If we only factor in Balram's subjective transformation, what we lose sight of is the allegorical representation of the world in which subjectivity is internalized. The grueling poverty of the rural that not only tosses Balram out of the education system but also instills in him the desperate desire to break away from servitude cannot be made sense of if we only engage ourselves in the figuration of his subjective transformation, for the subject only partially and symptomatically represents the broader transformations of the social and non-subjective world. In order to understand how neoliberalism positions itself within the web of life, one needs to carefully note the tension and the transaction between the subjective and the objective world, so as to understand how objects, commodities, institutions and other non-human denominators affect the relations in which the subject takes birth and develops.

It is, therefore, imperative that we take note of the Marxist theories of neoliberalism when we seek to read fictions as neoliberal allegories, for it is in the works of theorists such as Harvey, Patnaik, Zamora, and Foster that we receive a carefully drawn outline of the capitalist universe we live in today. What we also need to remember is that when we discuss the historical emergence of neoliberalism we cannot postulate it as the dawn of an entirely new era marked by the emergence of a new subject. Rather, neoliberalism needs to be understood as a specific moment within the history of capitalism – a moment that is not entirely unique, nor completely like other historical moments either – a moment marked by the temporary victory of capital over labor, ushering in an era characterized by imperialist wars and accelerating refugee populations, massive inequality and proletarianization, destruction of ecology and species, and dismantling of democratic and welfare state institutions. David Harvey, in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, describes neoliberalism as a project directed towards the goal of achieving “the restoration of class power” (16). In *Imperialism and Global Political Economy*, Alex Callinicos argues that neoliberalism has given “capitalists and state managers alike the ideological cohesion and self-confidence to force back organized labour” (207). In Daniel Zamora’s account, neoliberalism becomes a process of production of the “surplus-population” – the “reserve army” of capital (797) as Karl Marx famously wrote in *Capital Volume I* – which restricts the bargaining power of organized labor and make high profits. John Bellamy Foster, following Samir Amin, has called neoliberalism the “imperialism of monopoly-finance capitalism.” In the same spirit, Indian Marxist political economist Prabhat Patnaik describes neoliberalism as “a process of ‘primitive accumulation of capital’ which accelerates the process of ... ‘centralisation of capital’” (“Trends of Centre–state Relations in India Under the Neo-liberal Regime” 91). He notes in a separate study that the withdrawal of the state from public procurement, a hallmark of neoliberal policy around the world, has led to the strange phenomenon of an “acceleration of rate in growth” on the one hand and “an increase in the magnitude of absolute poverty” on the other (“Growth and Poverty in the Indian Economy” 19, 25). All of these theorists stress that neoliberalism is best understood as a class project, deeply invested in the process of enriching the few by taking away from those who live at the very bottom of the economy.

These political economic descriptions of neoliberalism, however, discuss little about the ubiquity of a neoliberal culture that has normalized itself in various institutions and aesthetic norms. How economic practices and institutions proffer a particular vision of culture has been brought to our attention by Marxist critic Bret Benjamin who, in his book *Invested Interests: Capital, Culture and the World Bank*, argues that economic institutions like the World Bank not only circulate economic policies but also “traffic in culture” (xiii). The parlaying of a particular vision of the world (culture) to advance a specific notion of development has become the Bank’s strategy for expansion. The economic culture advanced by the Bank may appear ununiform from a distance, but, as Benjamin points out, underneath that façade lurks a more

uniform history of playing an “essential role” in aiding “imperial power and global capital” since 1945 (2). The Bank, since its inception, has been parceling out “the capitalist principles of trickle-down economics,” thus disseminating a culture that presumes that “the generation of wealth in any sector” will be beneficial to all classes (15). It is not difficult to notice the likeness between the Bank’s culture and the kind dispersed by the avatars of neoliberalism. Predominantly introduced as institutional reform, Thatcher-Regan neoliberal policies also circulated particular visions of the world that required corresponding cultural forms. Neoliberalism, advances an acutely capitalist vision of the world that believes in trickle down effects, suggesting that the enrichment of the capitalist class ensures the enrichment of the entire society and the world. By conjoining the market with personal freedom, neoliberalism not only asserts the primacy of the market over all other entities and institutions, it also circulates a specific kind of culture that encourages individualized expressions of freedom and subversive acts but undermines all forms of collective practices that are not in sync with the interest of the market. Any kind of solidarity, any form of non-value producing work, appears threatening to its suspecting eyes. It is no surprise then that monetization and atomization remain two fundamental conduits through which it smuggles out its ideologies. Both are fetishized in neoliberal culture because without them the idea of the free market cannot be legitimized.

### **Reading South Asian Fictions Allegorically**

As this paper has explained earlier, the allegorical presentation of neoliberalism can take two different trajectories: representation and critique. Many of the fictions written in the 1990s can be read as allegorical presentations of neoliberal structure of feeling – anticipations of the ascending neoliberal culture. Bangladeshi novels written in the late 1980s and early 1990s flash the symptoms of anxiety about monetization and corruption – an anxiety that is at once peculiar, pervasive, and profound. The new managerial class, entrepreneurs, and political beneficiaries of military dictatorship appear in these fictions as upstarts who threaten the foundation of Bangladeshi society. The general sense of anxiety observed in Bangladeshi literary representations corresponds to the broader social and cultural reshuffling that was going on in the country in the 1980s and the 1990s. As neoliberalism was yet to become the historical dominant, such representations can be seen as an apprehension of the general structure of feeling that circulated as a hunch or prescience in culture.

Take, for instance, Nepalese fiction writer Samrat Upadhyay’s short story “The Good Shopkeeper.” On its face, the story seems to have very little to do with neoliberal form or content. A realist short story narrating the crisis of an old-fashioned accountant’s life, “The Good Shopkeeper” registers little formal challenge. Its plot also seems far removed from a critical presentation of the neoliberal structure whose effects can be immediately identified. Upadhyay’s Kathmandu is not a space of intense capitalist activity marked by rural to urban migration, nor a fast-paced city characterized by postmodernist culture and newly erected malls and apartments. The chaotic madness and greed that characterizes Adiga’s *The White Tiger*’s Delhi or Naqvi’s *Home Boy*’s

New York City, for instance, are also absent in Upadhyay's narrator's Kathmandu. His tone, throughout the narration, remains subdued, echoing the city's relatively calm and slow-paced life, its unpretentious simplicity, and its feudal culture. Nepal at that time was still formally a monarchy, although its constitutional reform was carried out in 1990. And yet, even here, we detect traces of the manifest features of neoliberalism.

The story's plot moves around the misfortune of an old-school accountant. Having been let go by his firm, Pramod, the protagonist of Upadhyay's story, sees his coherent life fall apart and his hopes dwindle. Unable to find another job – a thing difficult to come by in Kathmandu – he seeks comfort in the temples of the city. What is rendered visible through Pramod's numerous visits to "Shambhu-da," his wife's prosperous cousin, is the structure of favoritism; jobs are only available if one has an influential guardian ready to use his political/financial influence to find one a position. Pramod's recurrent visits to his powerful relative, however, yield nothing substantial and he grows bitter as he struggles to find a job. His wife who also struggles heavily with their seven-month old daughter, advises him to sell a plot of land they own and set up a shop. Pramod, thinking shop-keeping is beneath his social class, rudely declines to do so despite his wife's entreatings, and despite his own repeated social humiliation. Deeply frustrated and vegetating in the parks of Kathmandu, he meets a "young woman" at the city park – a woman far below his social rank, who works in an affluent house as a "servant" (10). Pramod's relationship with the "servant woman" can be interpreted in a number of ways, most effectively as his patriarchal revenge on his wife as well as a neurotic reaction against his self-perceived emasculation through joblessness. His relationship with the maid can also be seen as a symbolic prefiguration of being declassed, which takes a fetishistic form expressing itself through the symptom of his ritualistic vegetation at the park and lazy afternoons spent inside her tiny room. Read as such, "The Good Shopkeeper" appears to stage an anachronistic feudal fantasy, mirroring the persistence of the feudal life that the city was still caught up in, the monarchy that was still ornamentally present when the story was written.

Yet, as I would like to argue here, a new schema emerges when this story is read as an allegory of Nepal's inscription in the global capitalist structure. Pramod, we are told, has lost his job to "a young man who knows computers" (5). We are also told about Nepal's new social structure when Pramod, wary of Shambhu-da's avoidance, imagines himself "as a feudal landlord, like one of the men who used to run the farmlands of the country only twenty years earlier," punishing him (8). This moment, which appears as fantasy, is evocative of Pramod's yearning for a long-gone feudal past, when society was hierarchically organized and where people like Shambhu-da had little relevance. It is against this backdrop that Upadhyay's story attains its allegorical relevance. Pramod's acceptance of his future existence as a shopkeeper allegorically represents Nepal's acceptance of its new class and social structure dominated not by landlords who ran the farmlands twenty years

ago but by people like Shambhu-da whose newfound wealth comes from “shady businesses” and construction jobs in the city (2). Likewise, the specter of computer-educated accountants replacing old school clerks also implies the nation’s changing technological landscape, moving in synchrony with the global technological changes. Written in the late 1990s when the effects of neoliberal global restructuring in Nepal was still in its nascent stage, Upadhyay’s story bears witness to impending social and technological transformations whose contours were still too distant to make out. It is Shambhu-da who mediates that distant horizon symptomatically embodying the emerging class which will accumulate through private trade but is also willing to employ violence, theft and dispossession as a means to secure wealth. What is deeply suggestive here is that the victim of Shambhu-da’s violence is a policeman. It is, after all, the body of the semi-feudal welfare state that the country must dump before entering the circuit of late capitalism run by advanced computing machines.

If Upadhyay’s story allegorizes neoliberalism by absorbing all the trivialities of a changing culture and by projecting onto the body of the nation the shadow of a distant world whose political and economic transformations are affecting lives in a relatively quiet part of the globe, Amitav Ghosh’s *Ibis* trilogy critiques neoliberalism more overtly, by exposing the vacuousness of the rhetoric of freedom and invisible hand of the market – neoliberalism’s ideological foundations. The trilogy does so not by directly engaging with the present moment but by reimagining a turbulent period of the nineteenth century, which, despite its apparent historical remove, functions as a mirror image of the world in which we live today. Ghosh started writing his trilogy in 2004, soon after the beginning of the Iraq war, and finished it in 2014, more than six years after the great financial crisis of 2008. At the center of its narrative stands a ship and its occupants whose lives the trilogy’s intricate plot follows. One of the characters that Ghosh’s novels closely pursue is the schooner’s carpenter from Baltimore, Zachary Reid. It is his remarkable transformation from being a mere carpenter to a partner in the firm that bought that ship that signifies the imperial cooperation in the form of Euro-American co-authorship in the Opium War, thus anticipating the Iraq war in whose aftermath the novel was written. Reid’s partnership with the British trader Benjamin Burnham also suggestively points towards the expanding brotherhood of free-trade ideologues who have the power to dictate what course their nations may take and against whom their nation must wage a war. Reid thus holds the key to the novel’s allegorical presentation of the pre-Iraq war political climate through the trope of the Opium War, whose re-narration allows us to see the connection between the present and the past.

Ghosh himself was interested in tracking this homology, this correspondence between what happened before the beginning of the Opium War and what happened almost two centuries later. How free trade became the rallying cry for the opium traders has been described by Ghosh in an interview, where he suggests that what inspired him to write the trilogy was the strange semblance between the past and the present. This interview, where Ghosh gestures towards the axis between imperial war and

free trade, clearly lays out the connection between The First Opium war and the second Iraq War. Noting the strange similarity and how it inspired him to write the trilogy, he states:

I started writing this trilogy in 2004, soon after the start of the Iraq War; and the Iraq War was of course fought in the name of freedom and free trade and so on and so forth. When I looked at the historical material on the Opium War it soon became clear that there were many similarities between that war and the Iraq War of 2003; it extends to the point where it's almost uncanny. ("The Opium Wars, Neoliberalism, and the Anthropocene")

When we read Ghosh's interview, the correspondence between the past and the present, Free Trade imperialism and Neoliberalism, and nineteenth-century primitive accumulation and the twenty-first century accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism* 91-92) begins to emerge. If, to travesty Fredric Jameson, the object of allegory is not meaning but structure itself (*Allegory and Ideology* 10), these transhistorical homologies gesture towards a broader structural relation between then and now – a relationship that allows us to see these multiple temporalities as coexisting moments within the broad historical expanse of capitalist modernity, where expropriation, exploitation, imperialism, and war exist as concurrent processes of accumulation.

To understand why I perceive Ghosh's trilogy as a critical presentation of neoliberalism, let us first turn to the most explicit feature of the trilogy's critique – rhetorical similitude. In her recent work *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*, Brown shows how the neoliberal discourse on free market is deeply invested in Hayek's insistence on the conjunction between the market and the moral, which now features in most conservative discussions about "God, family, nation and free enterprise" (89). In *River of Smoke* (2011), the second novel of the trilogy, we see similar rhetorical strategies from Benjamin Burnham, the owner of the *Ibis*. When the Chinese, determined to prosecute those Hong merchants who persist with the opium trade, make their intentions public, Burnham, who hears the news from a fellow British trader, is infuriated, calling the Chinese commissioner "a monster" (431). Hearing Burnham's comment, Mr. King, an American businessman, quips whether Burnham sees anything monstrous in his own actions. The latter responds:

No, sir ... [b]ecause it is not my hand that passes sentence upon those who choose the indulgence of opium. It is the work of another, invisible, omnipotent: it is the hand of freedom, of the market, of the spirit of liberty itself, which is none other than the breath of God. (432)

This idea that no mortal has the authority to intervene in the market because its freedom has been warranted by God himself validates Foucault's observation that neo-liberals do not accept the jurisdiction of the sovereign in the matter of trade. To them, the market exists outside political jurisdiction and, therefore, cannot be governed by the same laws that operate in the nation or society.

By invoking the rhetoric of the free hand of the market, Burnham is not indeed leaning towards Adam Smith and classical liberalism, whose worldviews remained more or less secular; he is, rather, aligning himself with the Evangelicals and the moralists like Hayek who sought to connect freedom of the market with Christianity. It is there that the novel's critique of neoliberalism explicitly comes to view. By putting the discourse of neoliberalism in the mouth of Burnham – a conservative British free trader – Ghosh is performing what Adiga does in his first novel: exposing the duplicity of neoliberal discourse by putting it in the mouth of an unworthy practitioner. The difference between the two novels lies in the manner in which these two preachers of neoliberalism practice their own preaching. Whereas Balram, Adiga's quizzical protagonist, practices it to the best of his ability by remaining true to the neoliberal mantra of entrepreneurship which proclaims that our relationships are all transactional, Burnham applies his credo selectively, validating the premises of the Marxist interpreters of neoliberalism who claim that neoliberalism is a rhetorical empty shell underwritten by class interest and imperial ambition. Two examples, I hope, will suffice. In *Sea of Poppies*, we see Burnham quickly and efficiently shelving the costs of economic loss on the shoulders of his local partners (80), thus bending the laws to avoid the cost of his business decisions. In *River of Smoke* (2011), the British traders collectively change the rules of business so they can monopolize the shipbuilding trade (422), putting the gospel of God's free hand to rest in a quiet corner. Both instances attest to how the trilogy effectively sees free market ideology as a discourse underwritten by class and imperial relations of power, as rhetorical exercises they are not only rehearsed sporadically but also applied unevenly, making sure that concentration of capital in the hands of the imperialists accompanied by a surfeit of logic that defends their right to accumulate wealth freely.

Ghosh's trilogy can be approached in another way as well – by way of the object. Once we approach these novels through the trope of opium, which serves as a master metaphor in them, their relationship to capitalist modernity becomes clear, allowing us to read the trilogy as an allegorical exposé not only of the capitalist production process itself which is marked by inequality and decrepitude but also of the risk of commodity circulation. As value in motion, the commodity's exchange and conversion into the money form must be performed without delay in order to avoid crisis. An inability to convert its valorized commodity form into money, we are shown, leads towards calamity and mortal conflict. In *Sea of Poppies*, the crisis ushered in by the deprecation of value of "American bills of exchange," results in the reduction of the price of opium, forcing the Burnham Bros. to face financial loss for the first time in its history (80). It is this loss that sets Benjamin Burnham to encroach on Raja Neel Ratan Halder's estate, driving the latter into exile. In *River of Smoke*, a chain of crises is unleashed when the Chinese government bans the sale of opium, resulting in a log of unsold opium which leads the British opium merchants to wage war on the Chinese. The tragic death of the Bombay merchant Bahram is

the consequence of the loss emanating from unmaterialized surplus value of opium – an economic loss which drives him towards frustration and then addiction, finally causing his death (503-510). *Flood of Fire*, the last novel of the *Ibis* trilogy, can be read as an allegory of overcoming the crisis of conversion by waging war and expanding the market even further. What is laid bare in the process is that war is a necessary strategy for overcoming capitalism's crises. The entire trilogy, thus, can be read as a story of capitalism's crisis of overproduction and price depreciation, and the violent means through which capitalism overcomes its crisis.

In *Capital Volume II*, Karl Marx writes how, once converted into commodity, capital must perform its “commodity functions” before returning to its owner in money form (122). The inability to do so, writes the German revolutionary, leads towards crisis and stagnation. Marx identifies various reasons for capitalism's crises, most notably the delay in moving from one circuit of capital to another. “If capital,” he writes,

comes to a stand still in the first phase, *M-C*, money capital forms into a hoard; if this happens in the production phase, the means of production cease to function and labor-power remains unoccupied; if in the last phase, *C'-M'*, unsaleable stocks of commodities obstruct the flow of circulation. (133)

The crisis that unfolds in the *Ibis* trilogy is the crisis of the third stage, when “unsaleable stocks of commodities” begin to pile up because the Chinese decline to allow their markets to be swamped by opium. The question that is raised in the process is not about the essence of opium and its objecthood, but rather how its valorization through production and exchange allows this object to become a commodity. It is here, in its willingness to tell how the commoditization of poppy leads towards crisis and war, the destruction of life as well as the environment, that Ghosh's trilogy's critical tenor is heard most clearly.

## Conclusion

Among the many discussions that are available on the trilogy, only a handful pay adequate attention to its representation of capitalism, and none on its relationship to neoliberalism. Only a handful of research works have taken note of the correspondence between past and present in Ghosh's trilogy, especially of its vexed relationship with our own time. Kanika Batra's otherwise excellent ecological reading of the second volume of Ghosh's trilogy in “Reading Urban Ecology through *River of Smoke*,” for instance, notices the mirroring of the present onto the past (323), but fails to navigate beyond the hybrid formations and postmodern style when it comes to explaining what that present looks like. Her ecological reading, therefore, goes only as far as pointing towards the novel's deft presentation of city botany, showing no interest in connecting city ecology with capitalism's expansion in the nineteenth century. Instead, her essay remains committed to the process of locating hybridity and postmodern aesthetic forms in the novel, omitting from discussion



the very conditions that facilitate hybrid social transactions through trade and cultural exchange. Binayak Roy's "Exploring the Orient from Within," likewise, characterizes the novel as a "meta-form" traversing disciplinary boundaries and effortlessly navigating the boundaries separating history and fiction (1). In contrast to these readings of the trilogy that extol Ghosh's *River of Smoke* for its exploration of hybridity, Paul Stasi's brilliant essay "Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* and the Question of Postcolonial Modernism" discusses how the first volume of the trilogy allows the capitalist *longue durée* to emerge on the surface by establishing a link between the past and the contemporary moment. He elegantly describes how the neoliberal present casts its shadow on the surface of the past by projecting on the narrative canvas of *Sea of Poppies* the "similarities between our own moment and that of an emergent modernism" (326).

The reluctance of postcolonial academics to address the conjuncture between capital and aesthetic forms can be construed as the discipline's inability to free itself from its liberal bias. The general lack of interest among the practitioners of postcolonial studies to address the question of capital was pointed out by a host of thinkers on the left, most notably by Aijaz Ahmad, Arif Dirlik, and E. San Juan Jr., in the 1990s, during the heydays of postcolonialism, and by Vivek Chibber, more recently. Chibber notes how postcolonialism emerged to become dominant as an academic discipline at a moment when working class politics and socialist states in different parts of the world were being upended by the forces of the market capitalism (2). Despite postcolonialism's pedigree of left politics – Edward Said, the discipline's most eminent figure, mentions in the "Afterword" of *Orientalism* that thinkers such as "Anwar Abdel Malek, Samir Amin, and C. L. R. James" were the forerunners of postcolonialism (349) – it began, at the turn of the century, to quickly shed its radical politics and moved to incorporate the issues that appealed to the *fin de siècle* "cultural turn" of theory (Chibber 1). Sumit Sarker, a prominent member of the Subaltern Studies group, which itself represents one of the most influential voices within the postcolonial tradition, has bewailed the group's gradual move away from its Marxist/Gramscian pedigree to embrace Foucauldian discourse analysis theory (300). To Sarker, such a distancing marks the group's domestication within the metropolitan postmodernist circles (300-301). Gayatri Spivak, the academic movement's other figurehead, categorically points towards what she sees as postcolonial theory's oversight, explaining how the fetishistic retreat into colonial discourse analysis in the era of "financialization of the globe" has been a sign of the diasporic postcolonial academic's complicit participation in the process (3).

Mostly articulated in the late 1990s, when neoliberal economic policies and a monetized culture began to flex muscles in academic institutions, these critiques blurt out deep anxieties about postcolonial studies' capitulation to neoliberal capital. They also point towards the conjuncture between the academic postmodernism and cosmopolitan liberal worldviews. This essay has tried to demonstrate through short textual readings of Upadhyay and Ghosh that radical critique of contemporary

hegemonic practices does not require one to commit to the theories of subjectivity to explain what is wrong about today's world. Nor is there any urgent necessity to sidestep class oppression to draw attention to hybrid formations and postmodern postures. The idea that motivates these readings is that there is a genuine need to re-establish the bond between anti-capitalist politics and aesthetic/critical pursuits. Literary studies' failure to engage theoretically and textually with the struggles of the majority of the people marks its alienation from the ordinary folks it alludes to every now and then. One of the objectives of this paper has been to establish that it is possible to bridge the gap between aesthetic readings and political/economic realities. The aesthetic itself is political. Social, political, ideological, and economic relations are already present in the text because the writer's, the text's, and the critic's worlds are shaped by those relations; however desperate one may be to run away from them, one cannot ignore, let alone escape, the traces of historical conditioning. Indeed, the desire to escape the processes of historical determinations by willfully disengaging from the sites of struggle more forcefully establishes the presence of socio-economic inscription in the author and the text. Hence the usefulness of allegoresis. In a world conditioned by neoliberal policies and capitalist relations, cultural and aesthetic productions are bound to bear the symptoms of these conditionings; it is also only expected that the hegemonic ideas will conceal themselves and erase the trails of their normalization within institutions and epistemological practices. It is here that an allegorical reading proves itself useful, for to do so is to draw out to the surface what the historical dominant tries to inter and conceal.

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