CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

BOOK FORUM

The Postcolonial Uncanny in "Toba Tek Singh"

Noor Asif

University of California, Berkeley, USA
Email: noor.asif@berkeley.edu

Introduction

A rhetorical performance and exploration of uncertainty, Freud's 1919 essay on "The Uncanny" is an attempt to define an experience of that which is both strange and familiar at once. As Ankhi Mukherjee reiterates in her recent book *Unseen City: The Psychic Lives of the Urban Poor*, never before had Freud sought to explicate an aesthetic theory, despite the fact that art, literature, and myth had undeniably shaped much of his thought. Mukherjee astutely suggests that the reason Freud undertakes this rare foray into the realm of the aesthetic "has something to do with the freedom of the literary writer, with fiction's prerogative to evoke and inhabit the emotions and phantasms of the reader, and the power to lift or impose censorship."[1] We see a hint of Freud's envy of literary writers in his earlier published lecture "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming" (1908), in which he postulates that though daydreaming uses the same psychical functions as creating art does, the artist's genius lies in her ability to use form to render otherwise displeasing or forbidden fantasies palatable for a wider audience.[2] By recourse to formal techniques, the literary writer gives shape and possibility to the unconscious so that these fantasies can enter the reader's conscious and achieve a temporary union between the two regions. Mukherjee extends this line of thought by focusing on how literary conventions allow readers to commune with their own emotions and fantasies, even (and perhaps especially) those that linger behind the barricades put in place by psychological censorship. The literary writer presents stories that help readers unravel

---

[1] Ankhi Mukherjee, "Slums and the Postcolonial Uncanny," in *Unseen City: The Psychic Lives of the Urban Poor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 109.

[2] Sigmund Freud, "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming," in *Literature and Psychoanalysis*, eds. Edith Kurzweil and William Phillips (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 19–28.

snippets of repressed material within their psyche. In other words, reading fiction allows readers to bypass regimes of censorship—including displacement, condensation, sublimation—that strive to otherwise curb intimacy between the unconscious and conscious.

Although Freud's discomfort in presenting an aesthetic theory of the uncanny is palpable in his essay, it has neither undermined the concept nor diminished its continued influence. Indeed, the idea of the uncanny has enjoyed a long afterlife, sustained by its eerie interpretability and claustrophobic capaciousness. In the chapter "Slums and the Postcolonial Uncanny," Mukherjee develops a new account of the uncanny inflected by the effects of global capitalism on impoverished communities within cities, namely their slums. Drawing on Mukherjee's formulation of the uncanny in the context of Mumbai's slums, what might the uncanny aesthetic reveal if we were to deploy it in a critical reading of one of the most famous stories about the partition of India? Consequently, how might a postcolonial uncanny aesthetic attend to the vicissitudes of decolonization in South Asia, as represented by literature?

What Is the Postcolonial Uncanny?

In unfolding the idea of a postcolonial uncanny, Mukherjee rapidly shifts from analyses of a 1958 Bengali avant-garde film, to Donna Haraway's notion of the cyborg, to Giorgio Agamben's meditation on animality, to the 2008 film *Slumdog Millionaire*, to Victorian and twentieth-century representations of British and Indian slums, to Freud's "The Uncanny," to Marx's *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, and so on in a mere eleven pages.[3] At times these shifts are lucid, and at other times disorienting, such that Mukherjee's argumentative logic becomes not unlike that of the analysand, deep in the haphazard flow of free association. Of course, free association as methodology is a foreseeable ploy in scholarly writing invested in psychoanalysis. And like the chain that free association comes to form in the spur of the moment, half-formed and open to interpretation, Mukherjee's connections invite readers to parse through the material in order to fit the pieces together themselves.

This methodological duality of free association and interpretation runs through the entirety of *Unseen City*, so that a vision of the uncanny that strings together Freudian thought, Marxism, and postcolonial theory comes to form a smaller component of the book's larger ambition to explore the efficacy of psychoanalysis and other therapies for contemporary underserved and urban populations across the globe. The book interrogates as much as it promotes psychoanalysis's therapeutic value for individuals subjected to geographically specific and economically driven traumas. Its interventions reside not only in its commitment to upending the static figures of the white, European, bourgeois analysand and analyst, but in its dedication to sustaining an interdisciplinary conversation between and within the humanities and social sciences, as well as

---

[3] Mukherjee, "Slums and the Postcolonial Uncanny," 99–110.

its revitalization of classic psychoanalytic ideas—like the uncanny—in the context of impoverished urban communities.

The chain of association Mukherjee presents in the chapter on slums and the postcolonial uncanny begins not with Freud's essay, but with her own oblique exposition of the uncanny aesthetic "in relation to the psychogeography of postcolonial Mumbai," and more specifically, Mumbai's slums.[4] "The porosities of the term 'slum,'" writes Mukherjee, "lend themselves to the definitional anxiety constitutive of the uncanny: interstice, under-city, leftover space, urban township, tenements, shantytowns, tent cities, shit-holes."[5] A "theoretical lag," produced by a collective disavowal of how political realities have shaped the slums, further destabilizes our notions of them.[6] As urban excess, the slums lack both purpose and precision. In other words, the realities that have shaped slums remain occluded, so that we perceive the slum as a leftover space rather than a central component of the city's infrastructure and the mechanisms that undergird it. To see the slum as a mere "shit-hole" hides the reality of its coextension with all that exists outside of it. Indeed, the slum's interstitiality does not emerge of its own accord but due to the structures of power that govern the city itself. To put it another way, the slum is not just the city's remains; it is a core part of the city as well as the direct and inevitable result of the processes that determine it.

Mukherjee's conception of the uncanny lends the aesthetic a revelatory purpose. Rather than directly revealing the immediate social, political, economic, and historical forces that have produced slums, the uncanny provides a way of seeing a *representation* of a slum "as an ambiguous site of the unconscious, imperfectly structured, and experienced *only* through fantasy."[7]

The slum is mediated through its fictional representation. And what we are able to see through fantasy helps us get closer to some semblance of reality, largely because fantasy allows us to hold ambivalence to the light—that essential contradiction at the root of all of our problems and desires—and make some sense of it. This interplay between fantasy and reality, and love and hate, marks psychoanalysis's central conceit. The slum's ambivalence manifests in the fact that it is represented as both excess and center—not unlike the unconscious—and the uncanny aesthetic works as a lens to reveal this paradox through an engagement with fantasy.

Moving from Freud and fiction to materialist conditions, Mukherjee puts into play Karl Marx's *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, a work known for "its delineation of capital society as a *locus suspectus*, an uncanny space."[8] It is worth quoting Mukherjee's account of the manifesto, and its helpfulness in relating to representations of slums, at length:

> Marx posits the proletariat as the interior point of what was perceived as all exteriority, the hidden core of a seemingly visible and interpretable

---

[4] Mukherjee, "Slums and the Postcolonial Uncanny," 108.
[5] Mukherjee, "Slums and the Postcolonial Uncanny," 108.
[6] Mukherjee, "Slums and the Postcolonial Uncanny," 108.
[7] Mukherjee, "Slums and the Postcolonial Uncanny," 108.
[8] Mukherjee, "Slums and the Postcolonial Uncanny," 109.

phenomenon—like the slum heart of Mumbai, the proletariat is the contradictory center of bourgeois society. The manifesto could be said to work like an uncanny aesthetic, bringing to light what ought to have remained secret and hidden.[9]

Once again, Mukherjee propounds the uncanny's ability to illuminate hidden things. Yet, unlike her earlier reflections on how fiction's preservation and formal display of unconscious fantasies can help us think of the slum as a container of both societal excess and centrality, here she envisions the uncanny as revealing the proletariat's centrality in capitalist society, a truth otherwise kept secret by the insidious workings of capitalism that strive to dismiss the proletariat's power.

The uncanny, then, alters the way we see as much as it changes what we see. For example, we might typically perceive the slum as the mere remains of a city, until an uncanny aesthetic reveals that the slum is constitutive of the city itself. And more, capitalist society occludes its proletarian heart, until the uncanny aesthetic reveals that capitalism can only operate due to the efforts of the working class. It is imperative that we keep in mind that, as Mukherjee seems to understand it, the uncanny operates most efficaciously within the realm of literature, or texts. In this sense, the uncanny aesthetic becomes the first step in enacting social and political change, facilitating the reader's slippage from art to reality, and inspiring within her the urge for material transformation.

Applying the Postcolonial Uncanny to the Asylum in "Toba Tek Singh"

To echo an earlier question, what might it look like to utilize Mukherjee's postcolonial uncanny aesthetic to read a partition narrative? What can we learn from such a reading, and to what end? Saadat Hasan Manto's short story "Toba Tek Singh" (1955) takes place in a Lahore mental asylum two or three years after partition, when the governments of India and Pakistan decide that their asylums ought to exchange patients based on religious affiliation.[10] Hindu and Sikh "lunatics" are to be relocated to India, Muslim "lunatics" to Pakistan. Upon catching word of this news in the Lahore asylum, the patients are utterly confused about the birth of this strange and unfamiliar country called Pakistan.

Just as Fanon believed that French colonialism produced his patients' symptoms, we can read Manto's patients as suffering from mental illness due to colonial rule. In the story, their symptoms are aggravated by the news of Pakistan's emergence and their own potential transfer to a different asylum based on religious affiliation. The idea of having to be relocated as a consequence of religious affiliation to or from an unknown nation is unfathomable for them. The story's power lies in its ability to render partition and Pakistan's creation absurd, not least through the fact that although the asylum is located in a

---

[9] Mukherjee, "Slums and the Postcolonial Uncanny," 109.

[10] Saadat Hasan Manto, "Toba Tek Singh," in *Kingdom's End and Other Stories*, trans. Khalid Hasan (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 11–18.

Pakistani city, the patients fail to understand that they now live in Pakistan. In this sense, the patients are reacting to the sheer uncanniness of Pakistan; it is meant to be familiar and homely because it is the ground on which they walk, and yet it becomes unfamiliar because they cannot comprehend where it is, what it is, or what it means.

Having experienced the violence of partition firsthand, Manto gave form to his own unconscious fantasies and psychological phenomena in the guise of short stories. Born in 1912 and raised in a Muslim family in Ludhiana (a district in Punjab), Manto seemed to have enjoyed the beginnings of an exciting though financially unlucrative career in Bombay where he wrote for the film industry.[11] Yet after partition, due to increasing violence against Muslims and the departure of many of his Muslim friends, Manto begrudgingly left Bombay and arrived in Lahore via Karachi in January 1948. As his niece, the historian Ayesha Jalal, writes, Manto "spent the next three months in a state of agitated confusion. Was he in Bombay, Karachi, or Lahore … ?"[12] In his own words, Manto describes his sense of confusion thus, "Despite trying, I could not separate India from Pakistan and Pakistan from India."[13] Manto's own experience of partition, and his attempts to grasp the reality of a radically different geographical landscape in South Asia, gesture at the uncanny. Confronted by that which was meant to be familiar—after all, a majority of the people he encountered in the cities he traveled through shared a similar ethnic makeup, cultural traditions, and languages, and realizing that it was violently made unfamiliar—wreaked havoc on Manto's mental health. He suffered from alcoholism, which would ultimately kill him shortly after he wrote "Toba Tek Singh."

Manto's literary work encapsulates his attempt to evaluate the success of decolonization in South Asia. Was partition the right answer to the problems provoked by colonial rule? Was it worth celebrating independence if it meant that the subcontinent was bloodied by a violent and depressingly arbitrary division? As Aamir Mufti explains, Manto's vast body of work can be understood "as a series of literary attempts to dislodge, from within, the terms of the attempted nationalist resolution of the question of collective selfhood and belonging."[14] In other words, Manto wanted to disavow nationalist mythologies that put forth illusory conceptions of tightly knit collective identities under the rubric of independence. His stories throw into relief the gaps in these alleged nationalist ideals by attending to the violence that resulted from independence. Yet it is important to understand, as Jalal writes, that "Manto wrote short stories that were not about violence as such but about people and their different faces."[15] Like Fanon, whose case studies in Algeria revealed the devastating

---

[11] Ayesha Jalal, *The Pity of Partition: Manto's Life, Times, and Works Across the India-Pakistan Divide* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 145.

[12] Jalal, *The Pity of Partition*, 146.

[13] Jalal, *The Pity of Partition*, 146.

[14] Aamir Mufti, "Saadat Hasan Manto: A Greater Short Story Writer Than God," in *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 178.

[15] Jalal, *The Pity of Partition*, 24.

consequences of decolonization on individual psyches at both ends of the struggle for independence, Manto was interested in writing about "perpetrators and the victims of their oppression" because "they help to lay bare the all-too-human characteristics that can momentarily turn the gentlest souls into the most demonic monsters."[16] His short stories brutally illustrate the effects of partition, particularly by centering on common people who have been thrust into an ambivalent moral and ethical value system produced by the collective chaos of the period.

Despite the fact that Manto allegedly never read Freud's work, the first half of "Toba Tek Singh" contains brief vignettes about individual patients and their symptoms in a style that feels reminiscent of psychoanalytic case studies.[17] Upon hearing about Pakistan and the impending exchange between asylums, the patients act out in different ways. A Muslim man climbs up a tree and declares that he would prefer to live on its branches rather than in India or Pakistan; another Muslim man declares himself to be Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan; and a Muslim radio engineer who otherwise likes to take long walks alone, takes off his clothes and runs, fully naked, into the garden.[18] A young and delusional Hindu lawyer suffering from heartbreak, whose beloved lives across the border in Amritsar, is told that he can move to India by virtue of his religion, yet obstinately refuses to leave Lahore, claiming that his practice will not succeed in Amritsar.[19] Mental illness is not limited to colonized subjects; two Anglo-Indian patients in the European ward go "into a state of deep shock" because they are "worried about their changed status after independence."[20]

The most notable patient is Bishan Singh, a Sikh man who used to be a "fairly prosperous landlord" in a place called Toba Tek Singh.[21] He has lived in the asylum for the past fifteen years and allegedly never sleeps and always remains on foot; "his legs were permanently swollen, something that did not appear to bother him."[22] And whenever he speaks, "it was the same mysterious gibberish: '*Uper the gur gur the annexe the bay dhayana the mung the dal of the laltain*" and other variations in which "*the laltain*" is replaced by words like "*the government of Pakistan.*"[23] Bishan Singh becomes very distressed upon hearing about the impending exchange between Indian and Pakistani asylums and abandons his usual gibberish to ask everyone who comes his way which of the two countries Toba Tek Singh is located in. A patient who calls himself God tells Bishan Singh, "Neither in India nor in Pakistan, because, so far, we have issued no orders in this respect."[24] Later, an old Muslim friend named Fazl Din visits Bishan Singh to alert him to the fact that that he will soon be relocated to India, where his Sikh family

---

[16] Jalal, *The Pity of Partition*, 24.
[17] Jalal, *The Pity of Partition*, 27–28.
[18] Manto, "Toba Tek Singh," 13.
[19] Manto, "Toba Tek Singh," 13.
[20] Manto, "Toba Tek Singh," 13–14.
[21] Manto, "Toba Tek Singh," 15.
[22] Manto, "Toba Tek Singh," 14.
[23] Manto, "Toba Tek Singh," 14.
[24] Manto, "Toba Tek Singh," 16.

has moved. Unfazed, Bishan Singh asks Fazl Din where Toba Tek Singh is, and Fazl Din nervously replies, "Where? Why, it is where it has always been ... In India ... no, in Pakistan."[25]

There is an emptiness to Bishan Singh's, and the other characters', distress. It recalls the way Mukherjee paraphrases the way the uncanny appears in Hélène Cixous's work as "the instantiation of ontological nothingness, an agitation, a repercussion, and a movement from fear to fear without telos."[26] Trapped in the asylum and subjected to the whim of the competing states, the patients are like ping-pong balls experiencing the same symptoms over and over again, yet with certain variances, unable to see an end or clear destination in sight. The story ends on the day of the great exchange between Indian and Pakistani asylums, on a strip of land between the two countries. A guard tells Bishan Singh that Toba Tek Singh is located in Pakistan, but by this time Bishan Singh's nerves are so shot that, for the first time in fifteen years, he collapses onto the ground and perishes neither in Pakistan nor in India, but in a no man's land. The crisis of partition throws not only patients, but their visitors, and the guards, into new, albeit familiar, structures of madness exacerbated by Pakistan's uncanny status.

Although the historical realities of asylums in South Asia exceed the bounds of this articles, it suffices to say that the colonial asylum, like the slum, is typically understood as a container of societal remains. Like the inhabitants of slums who are seen as being economically inhibited from participating in the more middle-class and affluent areas of city life, the asylum's patients are seen as incapable of coexisting with the public due to the severity and disruptive capacity of their mental illnesses. Following Mukherjee's formulation of the revelatory capacity of the uncanny, deploying an uncanny aesthetic might reveal the material realities of colonialism that underpin Manto's representations of the patients' symptoms. In this sense, the colonial asylum reads as a container of colonial society's political, social, and economic conditions in their most saturated and excessive form, so that the patients are not mere marginalia, but represent the core of society's material realities and function as indications of its overall wellness. Their symptoms tell us something about the public sphere from which they are otherwise excluded.

On the topic of communal neuroses, Mukherjee expands on Freud's ideas and writes that "in an individual neurosis, the pathology of a patient needs to be demarcated and differentiated in the context of the relative normalcy of the group to which they belong."[27] She quotes Freud directly: "For a group all of whose members are affected by one and the same disorder no such background could exist; it would have to be found elsewhere ... we may expect one day someone will venture to embark upon a pathology of cultural communities."[28] Mukherjee reads in Freud's words a "tone more wary than condescending" and argues that "Freud is cautioning against two outcomes here: treating communal

---

[25] Manto, "Toba Tek Singh," 17.
[26] Mukherjee, "Slums and the Postcolonial Uncanny," 110.
[27] Mukherjee, "Slums and the Postcolonial Uncanny," 103.
[28] Mukherjee, "Slums and the Postcolonial Uncanny," 104.

neuroses out of context, and misapplying a methodology honed for individual therapy to address a collective."[29] In "Toba Tek Singh," it is clear that the context of the patients' communal neuroses is the long shadow of colonialism and the sudden effects of decolonization, namely the creation of Pakistan. And while Freud developed the uncanny as a descriptive aesthetic model through which we could glean certain residues from our phases of infantile sexuality or echoes of more primitive and animistic histories, Mukherjee shifts it to a more prescriptive and material register, imbuing the uncanny with a clarifying power to get to the heart of things that are otherwise hidden by political and economic regimes of censorship—like those of the British Empire, for instance.

Mukherjee's *Unseen City* touches on the usefulness of psychoanalytic thought in various contexts and through myriad examples. The book's power lies in its ability to constellate unlikely notions and inspire readers to take the next step and promote material change. Yet, applying Mukherjee's theory of the uncanny aesthetic to a short story about the partition of India and birth of Pakistan raises several questions. This article has examined the uncanny in relation to representations—of slums and asylums, of contemporary Indian poverty and Pakistan's nascent chaos. But what would it mean to call a nation-state, and the conditions of its emergence, uncanny? What purpose can the uncanny really serve if used to analyze not representations, but real, material conditions of social and political life? And how might an uncanny aesthetic work toward formulating an actual course of treatment for individuals subjected to the material suffering and psychic trauma of partition or decolonization?

Author biography. Noor Asif is a PhD candidate in the Department of English at the University of California, Berkeley. She is also an associate editor for *Parapraxis Magazine.*

---

[29] Mukherjee, "Slums and the Postcolonial Uncanny," 104.