

CHAOS AS SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONFLICT IN
ARAVIND ADIGA'S *BETWEEN THE
ASSASSINATIONS* AND TABISH KHAIR'S *THE BUS
STOPPED*¹.

Caos come conflitto sociale e culturale in “Fra due omicidi di *Aravind Adiga* e *Il bus si è fermato* di Tabish Khair.

Federica Zullo

Università di Bologna, Dipartimento di Lingue e Letterature Straniere Moderne,
Federica.zullo@unibo.it

In my paper I explore how national problems, social contrasts and political turmoil are expressed by the different forms of “locality” narrated by Aravind Adiga and Tabish Khair’s novels and I investigate the modalities through which these chaotic spaces are constructed, considering the relationships between place and identity, nation and community.

Keywords: Chaos, Conflict, India, Adiga, Khair.

¹Paper delivered at the 5th AISCLI (Associazione Italiana per lo Studio delle Letterature e Culture di Lingua Inglese) Conference: “Contemporary Sites of Chaos in the Literary and Arts of the Postcolonial World”. 29-30 September 2011, University of Naples L’Orientale.

Federica Zullo

In my paper I explore two novels, *The Bus Stopped*, by the Indian writer, poet and literary critic Tabish Khair, published in 2004, and *Between the Assassinations*, which came out in 2008, by Aravind Adiga, winner of the Man Booker Prize for *The White Tiger* in the same year. I chose these two works in relation to the topic of the conference, because they contain interesting and original narrative strategies for the representation of a postcolonial chaotic space such as the Indian space, with its specific features and complex locality. First of all, I would like to make some useful theoretical considerations, in order to define the object of my discourse, that is above all the relationship between nation and people in postcolonial times. And I must recall Homi Bhabha's reflection in his famous essay "Dissemination", on how the concept of the people emerges within a range of discourses as a double-narrative movement. The people are not simply historical events or part of a patriotic body politic. They are also a complex rhetorical strategy of social reference; their claim to be representative provokes a crisis within the process of signification and discursive address. We then have a conceptual contested territory where the nation's people must be thought in double time; "the people are the historical objects of a nationalist pedagogy, but also the subjects of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation-people to demonstrate the prodigious, living principles of the people as contemporaneity"². Bhabha underlines the necessity to repeatedly transform the fragments, parts and pieces of every day life into signs of

² H. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London, Routledge, 1994, p. 8.

national culture, while the same act of narrative extends to a larger sphere of national subjects.

In the two novels I am going to discuss, we can certainly acknowledge the emphasis given to the people claiming to be representative in the nation-state, to the crisis that such a process provokes and to the territory of marginality in which many of the stories take place. Adiga portrays character sketches of the inhabitants of Kittur, a fictional town in Southern India, between Goa and Mysore, in the state of Karnataka. The novel probes into the sense and sensibilities of the people during a seven year period, from 1984 to 1991 – between the two tragedies that shocked the nation with the assassinations of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and her son Rajiv Gandhi, a period of violence, riots and disorder all over India.

Like a tourist guide, the author invites his readers to spend at least a week to observe life in Kittur in its multifarious shades. He says, “Given the town’s richness of history and scenic beauty, and diversity of religion, race and language, a minimum stay of a week is recommended”³.

Each of the stories begins with a short touristy description of some section of the town, replete with anthropological detail. The official history of the guide, together with the map featured on the inside front cover, seems to give a neat and ordered picture of the place, contrary to what we read soon after in the stories, as we come up against the clutter and chaos of smalltown life, where "a subaltern army of semen, blood and flesh" jostles to survive. As in *The White Tiger*, Adiga is concerned with issues of injustice and poverty, and these fluid, flickering stories are

³ A. Adiga, *Between the Assassinations*, 2008, New Delhi, Picador, p.1.

Federica Zullo

as far removed from the gentle ironies of R.K. Narayan's short fiction as Kittur is different from Malgudi, although critics have tended to associate the two places. What emerges, as the writer Vikas Swarup says, is not so much a moral biography of an Indian town as the autopsy of a morally dead town. The poor, whose life is an "instalment plan of troubles and horrors", are waiting "to strike a blow against the world", while the rich decry their own existence "in the midst of chaos and corruption". The characters are all in conflict and alienated in one way or another, grappling with their inner demons, seething or scheming. In unsentimental, utilitarian prose, Adiga fleshes out their contradictions and maps their aspirations and anxieties. For although themes like religious violence or corruption constitute the focus, they are simply part and parcel of the lives of his characters.

Similarly, Tabish Khair's book, *The Bus Stopped*, is set in a provincial area, in the state of Bihar, Northern India, and chronicles the lives of several characters who do not inhabit a town like the people of Kittur do, but occupy a common space, which is a private bus on its regular journey from Gaya to Phansa. In the words of Adalinda Gasparini, psychoanalyst and translator of the Italian edition, the book can be described as a self-moving labyrinth, its unity given by its constant and multidirectional movement which shows the unceasing transformation of landscapes, traditions and people. Khair's tableau covers a wide social and economic spectrum. People belong to different castes, religions, have histories that go back to the trauma of Partition and have to do with India's economic growth in a globalised world, with inequality and poverty. The book has an initial chapter or Prologue called "Homes" and

Chaos as Social and Cultural Conflict

a finale whose name is “Homes, again”. People’s lives are caught in conflictual and problematic conditions, moments of transition and fundamental change, but it seems, unlike what happens in *Between the Assassinations*, that the narrator, who reconciles himself with the homes of his life, between India, England and Denmark, tries to find a home, a place for everyone in the story, a refuge, somewhere to go back and find comfort amidst the chaos and difficulties of everyday life. Yet, this is a novel haunted by houses, by:

their scratched geography, their shadowed histories, their many voices of noon and curtailment, evening and smokeliness". These places are multi-layered, contain secrets, uncover truths and reflect the social inequities and contrasts from a private, familiar perspective. Homes. “For both the houses border the heart of a space that does not lend itself easily to translation. It is a space of many shades of skin, many dialects and languages spoken by servants and family members; a space of people, memories and practices that see no need to be called by another name”⁴.

Khair writes prose like a poet and the chapters wind and then unwind like sonnets. Critics have defined it a lyrical journey, a tale of transition, capturing the essence of what is happening.

The kind of space represented in both works is certainly heterogeneous, characterised, as B. Westphal, author of *La géocritique*, puts it, by contradictory tensions born out of incompatible systems of representation. There is a plural perception of space and different points of view for those who explore and interpret it. This same space is continually crossed by subjects who dare to transgress its various

⁴ T. Khair, *The Bus Stopped*, London, Macmillan, 2004, p. 5.

territories, to challenge chaos, which is, in our narratives, the chaos of a closed and unjust economic system, the oppression caused by artificial boundaries of caste and class, the paradox of living in a so-called liberal state but being continually enchained by its discriminations. In the novels we find zones of deep uncertainty, of violence and explosion of the so-called “territorial terror”, a terror deriving from the occupation of spaces which progressively lose their aspect of security and familiarity.

In fact, it seems that everyone is moving within his/her own assigned territory, but the author is able to show the conflict that immediately arises when someone steps into other people’s space and claims it. The conflict is always on the border, across the shadow lines of passage and demarcation. The focus is on the people who challenge the authority of a dominant discourse within the nation. Adiga and Khair create characters who mostly belong to minorities, to the lower classes, and are not afraid of facing the chaos of life, they have swear words for it, they sometimes use blasphemous language, they are irreverent and most of the time they do not succeed in improving their condition, but the conflict goes on, it must go on.

In *Between the Assassinations*, in the chapter called “Market and Maidan”, two orphaned brothers come to Kittur to find an uncle who might find them a job. On their arrival at the busy market from their country village, after being cheated by the rickshaw driver, they first try to understand their new environment: “When they got out, they found themselves once again in a vortex of light and noise; they kept very still, waiting for their eyes to make sense of the chaos⁵.”

⁵ A. Adiga, *op.cit.* p. 116.

Chaos as Social and Cultural Conflict

The experience of the place is filtered and perceived through all the senses and in both works it is noticeable how the so called “sensuous geography”, recalling the book by Paul Rodaway (*Sensuous Geographies. Body, Sense and Place*) works together with the mapping of different sites of chaos. An example in Adiga comes again from the market, describing the moment of a cricket match:

When there was a cricket match, the entire market would be abuzz. He went from store to store; each shopkeeper had a black small transistor that emitted a crackly noise of cricket commentary. The entire market was buzzing as if it were a hive, whose every cell secreted cricket commentary⁶.

On the whole, in Adiga’s book, sounds convey the experience of Kittur, but are “grating sounds”, annoying, upsetting. There is consistent reference to the “hubbub” of city life, which then seeps separately into our consciousness in “that faceless buzz” of a classroom, the “growling” of cement mixers. And the glints and gleams of the sun brilliantly catch the eye here and there: we find expressions like “an oasis of pure light”, “a vortex of light”, “a block of light on the floor, like the tail of an incandescent bird”.

The collection of stories is also a collection of memorable images from the teeming city: the “Hindu buses” beating the “Christian buses” in a race back to the depot; “a boy cycling furiously, a block of ice strapped to the back of his bicycle”, desperate to reach the top of the hill before it melts. We definitely make a multisensorial journey throughout

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 132.

Kittur, but maybe for the tourist it is not the common or ideal tourist itinerary; the same can be said for *The Bus Stopped*, which comes to be not a normal bus route, but an experience of life and death, a difficult test for the passengers, caught in the midst of a tragedy. The silent tribal woman who carries a bundle with her dead child and refuses to acknowledge he is dead is the episode around which the disparate lives intersect on the journey get together, each one behaving differently in the face of such a disturbing situation. It is a story nobody can ignore, it is the reason why the bus stops. It has to do with the incompatible systems of the nation, with subaltern stories that are not seen, nor accepted but arise suddenly to disturb the social configuration of a place. The bus driver observes the event, but he is speechless:

From his vantage point high above the crowd that had collected around the steps of the bus, from his driver's seat, Mangal Singh could see more than most. He could see the men pushing, feeling; he could hear the suspicion and surprise in their voices. He could feel how everyone, in his or her own way, was already trying to assimilate this thing into the longer and separate stories of their lives, the stories they had brought into the bus and would continue weaving out once they left it, yes, they had no choice but continue those separate stories – if necessary, stepping over this thing, this unexpected thing, this alien thing that would otherwise make their separate stories redundant⁷.

As Gasparini writes, “Tabish Khair’s labyrinth is not built to isolate someone who disturbs the city inhabitants with his existence, but rather

⁷ T. Khair, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

to offer a complex space in order to give hospitality to the different characters and their stories, for their experience have to be seen, guessed, heard, glimpsed”.

Both Kittur and the bus route Gaya-Phansa have been defined as a microcosm of contemporary India, but they are not, in my opinion, an Indian everytown or everylandscape, they are specifically Kittur or Bihar. This is to say that writers have melted a sense of specific locatedness with the coordinates of a more official, enlarged national framework, but what emerges remarkably is the sentiment of a unique place and its people.

In Adiga, the historical dates that mark the seven-year period of the stories seem given just to offer some temporal reference, so the characters have the opportunity to refer to politics in order to talk about their own states, needs and deprivations:

Everything’s been falling apart in this country since Mrs Gandhi was shot’, the man in the blue sarong said, kicking his legs about. Buses are late. Trains are late. Everything’s falling apart. We’ll have to hand this country back to the British or the Russians or someone, I tell you. We’re not meant to be masters of our own fate, I tell you⁸.

In one of the episodes, Chennaya, the cycle-cart puller who is always trying to find a better job, thinks of going into politics:

A sign outside showed Indira Gandhi raising her hand, with the slogan: “Mother Indira will protect the poor”. He smirked. Were they completely nuts?

⁸ A. Adiga, *op.cit.* p. 302.

Federica Zullo

Did they really think that anyone would believe a politician would protect the poor? But then he thought: maybe this woman, Indira Gandhi, had been someone special; maybe they were right. In the end she was shot dead, wasn't she? That seemed evidence to him that she had wanted to help people. Suddenly it seemed that the world did have good-hearted men and women – he felt he had cut himself off from all of them by his bitterness. Now he wished he hadn't been so rude to that journalist from Madras...⁹

Of course, he fails to get a job after having worked for the elections. Space rather than time plays a part in the narratives. An effective example is the description of one the most attractive sites of Kittur, almost at the end of the novel/tourist guide. It is it The Cathedral of our Lady of Valencia, which really constitutes the symbol of a postcolonial site of chaos:

It cannot be easily explained why the Cathedral of Our Lady of Valencia still remains incomplete, despite so many attempt to finish the work in recent years and so much money sent by expatriates working in Kuwait. The original baroque structure dating to 1691 was entirely rebuilt in 1890. Only one bell tower was left incomplete, and it remains incomplete to the present day. Work resumes fitfully and stops again, either because of a lack of funds, or the death of a significant priest. Even in its incomplete state, the cathedral is considered Kittur's most important tourist attraction. Of particular interest are the frescoes of the miraculously preserved corpse of St. Francis Xavier painted on the

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 200.

Chaos as Social and Cultural Conflict

ceiling of the chapel, and the colossal mural entitled *Allegory of Europe Bringing Science and Enlightenment into East Indies* behind the altar¹⁰.

It's easy here to recall Rushdie's description of Bombay/Mumbai in *Midnight's Children* or works by Amitav Ghosh such as *The Circle of Reason* and *In an Antique Land*, referring to the colonial and postcolonial processes of cities, communities and nations.

Incompleteness is the condition in which not only physical sites, but also most of the characters find themselves. Cultures have clashed, intertwined, overlapped and continue to do so. This is India. And this is what Farhana Begum, the trans-sexual eunuch in *The Bus Stopped*, wants to tell to the old woman who believes she is a Hindu because she has good manners and talks as she were still during Partition times, a Hindu against the Muslims:

I did not tell her that the nuances of our culture that she so appreciated in me had been learnt under a Muslim ustad and were part of the culture of the very people whom she would never forgive. (..) For human beings are like pieces in cloth in the rain of time: porous. Cultures seep into us; we get heavy with our everyone else's history. I could tell her that, but I would not.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 255.