On August 14, 1947, at the midnight hour marking India’s independence from Britain, Jawaharlal Nehru, the incoming prime minister, delivered a memorable speech describing the significance of the moment to the nation and the world at large. Its opening lines, rich in figurative language, reveal the populist and internationalist orientations that had become embedded even within official Indian nationalist discourse by the late colonial and early postcolonial periods:

“Long years ago, we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge [ . . . ] At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom. A moment comes [ . . . ] but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance. It is fitting that at this solemn moment we take the pledge of dedication to the service of India and her people and to the still larger cause of humanity. (Nehru, “Tryst with Destiny” 3)
Nehru’s words crackle with revolutionary intensity in describing the long-awaited moment, a world-historic and rare opportunity for human beings to “step out from the old to the new.” But he hastens to say that this is also a “solemn moment,” a moment of pledges and responsibility, the first step in a longer journey whose goals are even more lofty. As Nehru bluntly states later in the speech: “The service of India means the service of the millions who suffer. It means the ending of poverty and ignorance and disease and the inequality of opportunity” (4). Referencing M. K. Gandhi’s aim to “wipe every tear from every eye,” Nehru states that “as long as there are tears and suffering, so long our work will not be over” (4). Finally, he emphasizes, such dreams “are for India, but they are also for the world, for all the nations and peoples are too closely knit together today for any one of them to imagine that it can live apart” (4). National independence, then, should not simply benefit the elites of the Constituent Assembly, Nehru’s immediate audience, who were poised to take state power. Rather, self-governance demands that these elites partake in an “incessant striving” (4) for popular welfare and global solidarity.

More than sixty years later, in light of the persisting inequalities within postcolonial nations and the manifold critiques of nationalism that have developed in its wake, scholars in the humanities and social sciences will tend to Nehru’s words with skepticism. Leaving aside the questions of implementation (did Nehru’s policies follow these ideals?) and intention (did Nehru really mean what he said?), a rhetorical and ideological analysis reveals that the Indian nation as represented in the “Tryst with Destiny” speech is a textbook example of Benedict Anderson’s theory, oft-cited in Anglo-American Postcolonial Studies, of nations as “imagined communities.” Like nationalists everywhere, Nehru seeks to convince ordinary Indians that they will find true freedom and unity, to use Anderson’s words, within the “deep horizontal comradeship” of the nation “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that prevails” in their day-to-day lives (7). Part of this project entails representing the nation as being both a product of history (“long years” of patient struggle) and an entity that transcends history, as if sovereignty were inevitable (a “tryst with destiny”). In rewriting political independence as a narrative in which “the soul of India,” at long last, “finds utterance,” Nehru posits a deep, essential unity on a people sharply divided by class, ethnicity, language, caste, gender, region, and religion. And this against the backdrop of the bloodbath and mass displacement engendered by the partition of British India into the nation-states of India and Pakistan—the gory price of political sovereignty in South Asia. Dispelling romantic myths of origins,
Partition revealed the fractured nature of national identities, and the violence that is inflicted on ordinary people when nations are made real through the force of laws and armies.

Beyond the necessary critique of elite nationalism, however, certain aspects of the context and content of Nehru’s speech demand that we analyze it more closely. First of all, despite the horrors of Partition, millions of Indians who had just defeated a mighty empire tended to agree with Nehru’s claim that independence was a step forward, and that the nation could become a vehicle for popular progress. According to Mildred Talbot, an American woman who stood with 500,000 others all night outside the Assembly Hall to participate in Independence Day ceremonies:

[T]he multitudes had gathered as far as the eye could see in the two-mile long parkway approach to the Secretariat, on tops of buildings, in windows, on cornices, in trees [. . . ] [As the flag was raised] there was almost a subdued hush over the whole crowd; then a soft bass undertone slowly swelled until, perhaps when the flag reached the top, . . . there was a breathtaking roar of cheering, shouting, and excited cries which others said penetrated to the hall inside and made their spines tingle. (qtd. in Tharoor, “1947, First-Hand”)

The excitement about the national flag emerged from the recognition that its new status represented a sea change in history. After all, the same flag for which activists had been jailed, beaten, and killed in the immediate past now represented the law of the land. Similar scenes of euphoria were to take place in the next few decades in independence ceremonies across Asia and Africa amidst the wave of decolonization following the Second World War. If we are to accept that the participants in such events were not simply dupes who mindlessly followed their leaders, then we must consider the possibility that nationalism in the context of a mass anticolonial struggle is a heterogeneous entity: appealing to elite desires for power as well as popular desires for emancipation.

Antonio Gramsci’s categories of “common sense” and the “national-popular” offer ways to understand this amalgamation of interests. For Gramsci, “common sense” signifies “the terrain of conceptions and categories on which the practical consciousness of the masses of the people is actually formed [. . . ] the ‘taken-for-granted’ terrain, on which more coherent ideologies and philosophies must contend for mastery” (Hall 431). Nehruvian nationalist ideology became dominant because it was able to “take into account, contest and transform” the terrain of common
sense more effectively than other ideologies (431). Over the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as several historians have shown, nationalism developed by linking with, rising above, absorbing, or marginalizing a number of related and/or autonomous movements (for class, gender, caste, and sexual equality) and ideologies (from Hindu-revivalism and cultural nationalism to secularism, feminism, and socialism). In the process of gaining hegemony, nationalism was able to forge and reshape a sense of the “national-popular,” that is, to make the aspiration for national freedom a crucial part of popular “common sense,” tying together (subaltern) desires and struggles for control over material resources to (elite) hopes for political and economic sovereignty. Nehruvian nationalism, in particular, contested ideas to its left that sought to construct a different notion of the “national-popular”—one that was more attentive to caste and class inequalities, the contradictions of capitalist modernization, the marginalization of Muslims and other minorities, and the oppression of women. But it also placed itself against the more reactionary versions of nationalism and society emerging from groups such as the Hindu Mahasabha and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). I do not mean to overstate the radicalism of Nehruvian theory and practice here; I am merely indicating that the progressive content of “Tryst with Destiny” ought to be read as being a bit more than political posturing. Nehru owed his popularity to his prominent role in engaging with this anticolonial “common sense,” and he was forced to respond to the mood for continuing change. Nehru’s populist rhetoric is, thus, a measure of the pressure that rising expectations placed on nationalist elites by ordinary people who had been involved for decades in various struggles against oppression. “Disavowing decolonization” because of the fact of elite leadership or its failures risks minimizing the historic and organic links between anticolonial nationalism and mass desires for democracy and social justice.

Namak-Halaal Cosmopolitanisms of the Nehruvian Years

In keeping with Decentering Rushdie’s focus on cosmopolitanism, we can look at Nehru’s speech from another angle: as an example of the cosmopolitan-elite writing and thinking that dominated the late colonial/early post-colonial period. Remarkably, “Tryst with Destiny,” one of the core texts of Indian nationalism, was delivered in the English language by an individual who grew up in a family of Anglophiles, who studied in English-medium schools in India, who attended Trinity College, Cambridge, trained as a
barrister at the Inner Temple, and represented, in short, the classic Anglicized Indian cosmopolitan. Leaders such as Nehru immediately complicate the binary opposition between cosmopolitanism and nationalism that is often taken for granted in postcolonial and cultural theory. On the one hand, Nehru shows that mainstream Indian nationalism was quite receptive to cosmopolitan-elite participation and leadership despite the populist and nativist assertions that often accompanied anticolonial sentiment. On the other hand, progressive cosmopolitans found in the nationalist movement a space for expressing their own global, secular, and democratic goals. This conjunction of nationalism and cosmopolitanism was familiar across the colonized world: like Nehru, for instance, M. K. Gandhi and Muhammad Ali Jinnah in South Asia, Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, Sukarno in Indonesia, and Leopold Senghor in Senegal were also drawn from European-educated, elite classes. The historical processes of colonialism and the anticolonial struggle themselves forced this development, pushing many progressive-minded, Westernized elites toward the nation. Discriminatory laws in colonial society regarding employment, education, housing, and social mobility demanded that elites, in their own self-interest, consider questions of national autonomy and sovereignty. No single yardstick can be used to measure the pace with which such developments took place in various colonized spaces, and how nationalist elites sought to link themselves and their organizations to the anticolonial theory and practice developing among oppressed and marginalized populations. In British India, at least, it soon became evident that mass involvement was crucial to any advancement toward such political autonomy. For example, the Indian National Congress, an organization created by Westernized elites in the late nineteenth century, became relevant only after Gandhian populism connected it to the concerns of ordinary Indians and their own, independent legacies of resistance. A namak-halaal orientation emerges, indeed, only out of this temporary alliance of classes around the anticolonial movement.

The “namak-halaal cosmopolitanism” that I identify among postcolonial Indian English authors in Decentering Rushdie—a cosmopolitanism that is “true to its salt”—is thus the expression in literature of a larger phenomenon among Anglicized Indian elites as a whole, rooted in the colonial experience and continuing on to the early postcolonial period. This orientation developed in the context of a larger milieu of Indian writers in all languages that, under the aegis of the Progressive Writers’ Association (PWA) and affiliated groups, explicitly linked literature, art, and culture to the political developments of the time. As Priyamvada Gopal
argues, the period leading up to and immediately following independence was a “cultural and political moment where the best writing in different Indian languages, including English, intersected with and was inflected by the diverse political exigencies of those times and the radical literary currents that responded to those exigencies” (“‘Curious Ironies’” 63). Not only “the best” texts but, I would like to suggest, novels of all sorts were inflected thus. Nayantara Sahgal’s *A Time to Be Happy* (1958) and Kamala Markandaya’s *The Coffer Dams* (1969), which I examine in this chapter, belong to a plethora of pre-Emergency Indian English novels that link their cosmopolitan concerns and sensibilities about a range of social issues to the national question. To give a sampling: Bhabani Bhattacharya’s *So Many Hungers!* (1947), Markandaya’s *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), Bhattacharya’s *He Who Rides a Tiger* (1954), R. K. Narayan’s *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955), Khwaja Ahmad Abbas’s *Inquilab* (1958), Narayan’s *The Guide* (1958), Atia Hosain’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961), and Bhattacharya’s *Shadow From Ladakh* (1966). Many of these texts were originally published in England or America; many of these authors were situated abroad. And yet they consistently “look back” toward the nation in positive ways, often mourning the cultural and/or actual distance between cosmopolitan-elites and ordinary Indians. In each of these very different novels, and scores of others like them, “the nation” appears neither as the cause of continuing social inequalities and conflicts nor their easy resolution but as a potentially emancipatory framework through which crises around class, caste, gender, sexuality, modernity, and cosmopolitan identity might be resolved.

Often, even critics who do reference Indian English novels before *Midnight’s Children* tend to minimize or even skip over the early postcolonial texts, moving from the nineteenth century (Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s *Rajmohan’s Wife*) to the so-called Big Three of the 1930s (Anand, Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan) to the 1980s and Salman Rushdie. Rather, I suggest, considering early postcolonial texts allows us to form a bridge between the politically charged period of the 1930s and 1940s and the metacritical narratives and nuanced representations of subjectivity and identity that mark post-1980s literature. Like the late colonial texts, early postcolonial novels sought materials and gained inspiration “from the nationalist mobilization and ‘upliftment’ of women, workers, untouchables, and peasants. At best, these narratives tend to represent the colonial encounter itself as a shadowy subplot to the larger story of socio-economic transformation” (L. Gandhi 171). Far from counterposing the nation to subaltern demands, in other words, writers of all stripes were driven to the paradigm
of the nation precisely because it offered, in its cross-class and universalist demands and claims, a vehicle for broader emancipation.

In keeping with my larger goal to demonstrate the multiple cosmopolitanisms of the Indian English novel, the central feature of namak-halaal texts that I explore in this chapter is the presence of ideological diversity despite a common orientation toward the nation. Sahgal’s *A Time to Be Happy* does put forth a perspective that is, like “Tryst with Destiny,” both namak-halaal and nationalist, seeing the modern nation-state as an inviolable unit that can resolve class and gender inequalities. But Markanda-ya’s text sits with the many postcolonial leaders, intellectuals, and artists who were quite critical of official nationalist discourse and the contradictions of Nehruvian India—even as they embraced the radical possibilities engendered under the rubric of anticolonial nationalism. Questioning the postcolonial present, and leaning toward a Gandhian/romantic critique of capitalist development, such texts reflect on Indian and local contexts and developments positively but seek to develop an alternative version of the “national-popular,” refusing to subordinate class, gender, ethnic, and religious differences to mainstream nationalism.

In order to illustrate both the prevalence and diversity of this namak-halaal orientation, I offer a brief comparison of three texts from the 1950s with very different ideological underpinnings: Bhabani Bhattacharya’s *He Who Rides a Tiger*, Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan*, and Faiz Ahmad Faiz’s famous poem “Subh-e Azadi” (“Dawn of Freedom,” Urdu 1952). *He Who Rides a Tiger* can be categorized as a nationalist text in that its narrative resolutions to the problems of rural poverty and caste oppression, set in the Bengal Famine of 1943, crystallize in the efforts of Biten, a militant rabble-rouser who transforms into a nationalist agitator. Focused on the lower-caste, subaltern characters Kalo and his daughter Lekha, the novel draws out the hypocrisies of the modernity-as-progress narrative of the colonizers and aligns itself with a Gandhian opposition to caste discrimination. But despite the novel’s formulaic approach to nationalism in terms of plot and theme, the text “actively engages the contradictions and complexities engendered by its historical moment” (P. Gopal, “‘Curious Ironies’” 79). Even though the text seems eager to bundle anticaste radicalism under the banner of nationalism, it differs from Bhattacharya’s earlier novel about the Famine, *So Many Hungers!*, in that it cannot offer any direct, nationalist closure (76, 79). Nationalism is certainly privileged as the sign of militancy and collective organizing in this novel: Bhattacharya appeals to nationalism to disrupt Kalo’s attempts to subvert hierarchies through individualist acts of mimicry and performance (he pretends he’s
an upper-caste Brahmin in order to escape rural destitution). However, at the same time, the subaltern-centered nature of the novel’s representations, and the acknowledgment that Indian rural elites are also contributing to the Famine, lead to a series of ironies and ambiguities that do not sit well with mainstream nationalist ideology (P. Gopal, “‘Curious Ironies’” 78–79).

Indeed, by the time of Shadow from Ladakh, published soon after Nehru’s death in 1964, Bhattacharya’s Gandhian critique of Nehruvian modernity is at its height despite the novel’s uneasy attempts to unite the two. What Leela Gandhi says about the ambiguous affiliations of novels of the 1930s and 1940s is only intensified in the early postcolonial period: “While the bulk of Gandhi novels faithfully narrative the conversion of the Westernized ‘foreign-educated’ protagonists to simple rural ideas, in reality those stories are often unable to eschew the cosmopolitanism of the Nehruvian alternative” (171). The actuality of independence and the onset of Nehruvian modernity, in fact, resulted in either a much more confident embrace of Nehru combined with a fond nostalgia for Gandhi (as in Sahgal’s early works) or a much deeper cynicism about the present day in which hope persists but is muted (as in Markandaya’s Nectar in a Sieve or Narayan’s Waiting for the Mahatma). My juxtaposition of Sahgal’s A Time to Be Happy and Markandaya’s The Coffer Dams explores how narrative strategies and representations of cosmopolitan-elite identity reflect and animate this spectrum of ideological debates on the nation.

Train to Pakistan can be called “non-nationalist” or even “antinationalist” in the sense that it mourns the violence resulting from the imposition of Indian and Pakistani national identities on the border town of Mano Majra. It presents an interesting version of a cosmopolitan text (a “self-hating cosmopolitanism,” perhaps?) that is so focused on its romantic portrayals of the rural that its biggest villains are “outsiders”: city-dwellers, politicians, and activist do-gooders. With deep sarcasm, Khushwant Singh rewrites Nehru’s “tryst with destiny” metaphor, asking whether the Prime Minister was referring to his alleged popularity with the wives of foreign diplomats, or to the many brutal “trysts” represented by the rapes of Sikh, Muslim, and Hindu women during Partition. Despite its rejection of official nationalism, however, Train to Pakistan is a namak-halaal text par excellence, so focused on exposing the destruction of local space and recovering its authenticity—often in a politically reactionary way, as far as gender is concerned—that no one from outside the village can do any good. The chief among these is Iqbal, the Westernized, pro-nationalist communist who talks big about bringing freedom to “the people” but
cannot mingle with them in the least; his snobby lectures about national liberation are so abstract that they do not speak to the villagers’ material needs. Unlike the particular transnationalism of post-Emergency texts, in which elite movements between Indian and Western spaces produce new insights into the problems of postcoloniality, A Train to Pakistan projects more local acts of border-crossing in its resolution. Its everyman hero Jug-gat Singh, now marked as “Indian” by virtue of being Sikh, is compelled by his love for Nooran, his pregnant, Muslim girlfriend (now “Pakistani”), to take decisive action in opposition to national and religious divisions.

Juggat’s selfless act at the railway crossing, preventing Sikh communalists (also “outsiders”) from slaughtering the Mano Majra Muslims on the train to Pakistan, leads to his death but enables readers to project a future for Nooran and her child beyond the text. Indeed, by describing Juggat in this final scene as merely as “a man,” silhouetted against yet another dawn, the implied author generalizes this action beyond the text, producing a model of transnational and transcultural subjectivity that is, nevertheless, firmly grounded in the border towns between India and Pakistan. The critique of nationalism and nation-states in this text does not translate into a valorization of the outsider but, through a masculinist romanticization of the peasant, produces a fierce commitment to an imagined local space of harmony.

The poem “Subh-e Azadi” is penned by Faiz Ahmad Faiz, the celebrated writer and intellectual—both a Marxist and a PWA member—who lived in Pakistan after Partition. For many like Faiz and Singh, 1947 is represented not as a moment of euphoria but one of sorrow and bitterness: the millions of people who were displaced, raped, and killed by Partition made a mockery of official pronouncements of freedom. Written while Faiz was in prison for his leftist political affiliations, “Dawn of Freedom” reflects back on the moment of Partition and distinguishes the Pakistani present from genuine liberation (cf. Genoways 110–12). Read alongside “Tryst with Destiny,” “Dawn of Freedom” reveals the same use of the romantic metaphor and light/dark imagery—but these are now turned to a critique of official nationalisms. The speaker of the poem declares: “These tarnished rays, this night-smudged light— / this was not that Dawn for which, ravished with freedom / we had set out in sheer longing” (1.1–3). As in “Tryst with Destiny,” freedom—feminized as the desired goal of the implicit male-heterosexual speaker—can come only from a long struggle: “our eyes remained fixed on that beckoning Dawn / forever vivid in her muslins of transparent light” (2.5–6). The nationalist leaders’ insistence that “our feet [. . . ] are now one with their goal” (3.3), however, is char-
characterized as a “terrible, rampant lie” (3.1). By declaring success, in Faiz, the leaders “polish their manner clean of our suffering” (3.4) and minimize the violence of the events of an independence that came at a terrible price.

And yet “Dawn of Freedom” does not dismiss the goal of freedom itself. Despite the incredible difference in their ideological perspectives, Faiz’s speaker, like Nehru, points to unfinished business and the long road ahead. Insisting that his body is “[s]till ablaze for the Beloved,” the speaker tells his audience to restart the journey: “Friends, come away from this false light. Come, we must / search for that promised Dawn” (4.2, 4.6–7). While the poem ironically twists Nehru’s symbols and contests the idea that freedom has been attained, it remains quite sincere about seeking the “promised Dawn” and confident in the possibility of reaching it. By implication, marking the leaders’ new positions as acts of betrayal suggests that the two groups of Dawn-seekers once shared a common path and yearning. It is this common commitment to the legacy of the national liberation struggle, an acceptance of its populist roots, and belief in the possibility of national regeneration that I discover in the novels before the Emergency period. Like Ammu at the very end of Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, they “look back” confidently even as they look away and ahead to a tomorrow that has yet to come.

**An “Ugly Child” but Our Child**

Despite their very different positions on postcolonial modernity and the new nation-state, then, *A Time to Be Happy* and *The Coffer Dams* share strategies of representation that produce an ethical and activist sensibility among their cosmopolitan-elite characters (and readers) in the interest of national regeneration. While *A Time to Be Happy* exhorts the contemporary postcolonial elite to emulate, in whatever possible way, the elites who directed their abilities toward the overthrow of the British Raj, *The Coffer Dams* targets elite Indians and the nation-state themselves as being complicit with postcolonial violence. Nevertheless, both texts emphasize the possibilities for solidarity and transformation even as they draw attention to the fact that the project of national liberation remains incomplete.

In fact, despite differences from postnational texts, Sahgal’s and Markandaya’s novels develop their namak-halaal perspectives through investigations of postcolonial subjectivities whose conflicts of identity and affiliation will be quite familiar to readers of the contemporary Indian English novel. *A Time to Be Happy* highlights the internal struggles of
Sanad Shivpal, an up-and-coming manager at a British multinational firm, as he considers quitting his job in order to better serve the nation. Through his direct experiences of Indian poverty and British racism in the late colonial period, in the context of the Quit India uprisings of 1942, the Bengal Famine of 1943, and independence/Partition in 1947, Sanad realizes the extent of colonial oppression and mourns elites’ alienation from the Indian masses. The unnamed and completely reliable narrator, a veteran of the Gandhian movement and a friend of Sanad’s father, helps Sanad sort out his existential and political dilemmas. The Coffer Dams features the crises of two characters whose efforts to inhabit their ascribed “cosmopolitan” and “elite” identities are thwarted by both their evolving notions of self and the material realities of gender, ethnicity, and class. The first, Helen Clinton, is the wife of a British contractor whose firm has been hired by the Indian government to build a series of dams in southeastern India. As Helen becomes friendly with and sympathetic to the local Adivasi (aboriginal) inhabitants whose villages will be flooded by the dams, she struggles against the limits of her white, elite identity as well as the gender restrictions placed upon her by British society. At the same time, Bashiam, an engineer of Adivasi origin and Helen’s lover-for-a-day, finds that modern Indian society will not allow him to escape from the Adivasi subject position that he despises, associating it with poverty and humiliation. Cut off from his roots but still regarded as a savage “jungly-wallah” by his British and Indian managers and co-workers, Bashiam finds that neither education nor training can rid him of his ethnicity—a fact that becomes increasingly apparent as the conflict between the dam-builders and the Adivasis intensifies. Though The Coffer Dams is far less confident than A Time to Be Happy in the prospects for national regeneration, both texts seek narrative closure by projecting a postcolonial future in which their new identities might be accepted.

The epigraphs above illustrate these pre-Emergency novels’ hopeful commitments to such a future as well as their ideological differences on the question of postcolonial modernity. The context of the first quotation is a conversation toward the end of A Time to Be Happy between the narrator and Veena Shivpal, Sanad’s younger sister, who is on a visit home to Sharanpur from the capital city of New Delhi where she works as a broadcaster for All-India Radio (AIR). The culinary standards of a local café, formerly “Claudette’s,” have clearly diminished since the departure of its British owners, and the insipid menu options provoke a more general reflection on the problems inflicting the new India, including the refugee crisis after Partition. But the incompleteness of the national project
(“[o]ne can have an ugly baby”), in this namak-halaal rendering, does not diminish the fact of national self-determination and sovereignty (“but it’s one’s very own”). Veena, representing a twenty-something generation that is free from Sanad’s angst, clearly expresses the exuberance about the new India that is conveyed by the title of the novel itself. In terms of the narrative sequence, Veena’s brief appearance in the novel follows the narrator’s extended meditation on elite complicity with colonialism in times past and the need for postindependence businessmen, politicians, and intellectuals who are independent and committed to building the new nation. Veena is a response to this problem: as an AIR broadcaster, she is directly involved in the national project at the infrastructural and ideological levels. Urban, sophisticated, and described as physically attractive, Veena enters the dusty, small-town atmosphere of Sharanpur as a dreamlike, magical figure, embodying the new nation’s potential to resolve postcolonial “ugliness.”

The second epigraph reveals a similar acknowledgment of postcolonial contradictions, but it emphasizes the difficulties of transcending them. Krishnan, the main nationalist voice of The Coffer Dams, shares Veena’s desire for Indian progress but is still waiting, a decade later, for the sovereignty and independence that she so proudly champions. Though a veteran of the anticolonial struggle like Sahgal’s narrator, Markandaya’s Krishnan is positioned in a very different place: he can imagine postcoloniality only as the continuing denial of the promise of national liberation. For Krishnan is employed by Clinton and Mackendrick, Ltd., the British builders working with the Indian government. Subject once more to the orders and insults of British overlords and seething from feelings of historical dependency and inferiority, Krishnan is trapped in a quintessentially postcolonial conundrum. Though he uses his skills as an organizer to unite skilled and unskilled labor and wrests some concessions from the British bosses, the scope of Krishnan’s rebellion is limited since he ultimately views the success of the dam as linked to Indian progress. For him, Indians and the British now “stood or fell together.”

The difference between Veena and Krishnan, thus far, seems more temporal than ideological: the nationalist euphoria of the 1950s, dying down, has become the nervous despair of the 1960s. However, the contrasting ways in which these nationalist characters are situated reveals the deeper ideological differences between the two novels. While Veena simply confirms and augments the nationalist position championed by the narrator of A Time to Be Happy, Krishnan’s nationalism is marginalized in The Coffer Dams. His dreams, of “a time when [Indians] could walk, ride, fly, and build solo, gathering strength and pride and thereby grow mighty”
are portrayed as examples of the violence and hubris contained in nationalist thought. At the ethical and political core of *The Coffer Dams* are not nationalists but the Adivasis who inhabit the hills and valleys where the dam is to be built. The entire novel is a sustained criticism of Indo-British cooperation in accelerating such a brutal modernity, and Krishnan’s contemptuous attitude toward the Adivasis underlines Indian-nationalist complicity with their marginalization. The critique of nationalism and modernity in Markandaya exposes a hierarchy of power that is missing in Sahgal.

Nevertheless, what joins these two viewpoints together and separates them qualitatively from many post-Emergency treatments of the national question is their activist concern with questions such as “What went wrong?” and “What can be changed?” Despite the explicit differences on representing modernity, Sahgal’s novel is far more critical of the nation than its title might indicate, as it mercilessly exposes the hypocrisies of Anglophile elites and remains fearful about the onset of modern industry. And Markandaya’s text opens up many doors for regeneration, constructing characters with different backgrounds (Indian nationals, Europeans, or urbanized Adivasis such as Bashiam) as being capable of empathizing with the plights of the Adivasis in the hills, of challenging what Patrick Hogan calls their “categorial identities” (notions of self derived from relatively fixed, socially defined categories) through developing alternative “practical identities” (aspects of self created through what one does and what one can learn). The category of “namak-halaal cosmopolitanism” is designed precisely to account for such deep differences between pre-Emergency texts while grasping their common emphases on elite responsibility and future possibilities.

**Sanad’s Political Awakening**

In the words of one critic, *A Time to Be Happy* features “the awakening of young Sanad, the ‘Brown Englishman,’ to the social and political realities of newly Independent India” (Naik 239). Mapping this awakening is central to discovering the novel’s *namak-halaal* and nationalist commitment, as Sanad represents the first generation of elites who came into adulthood in an independent India. However, while the author’s political affiliations appear everywhere—the novel is even dedicated to “Mamu,” Sahgal’s affectionate name for Nehru, her maternal uncle—a true sense of its *namak-halaal* orientation emerges when we take account of the novel’s
narrative strategies and articulations of character and voice. The way in which the first-person Gandhian narrator relates and shapes Sanad’s story is as important to the text’s achievement as the story itself. Alternating between and linking together the voices of the narrator and Sanad—the finished product and the work-in-progress, respectively—the novel constructs a veritable handbook for the English-educated cosmopolitan who wants to contribute to the new India. It is ultimately, however, unable to resolve the contradictions of modernity that are often expressed under the signs “Gandhi” and “Nehru.”

With the novel set in the years just after independence, the narrator begins by reporting the question that Sanad posed to him: should he leave his prestigious job in Selkirk and Lowe, Ltd., a British multinational textile firm, in order to better serve the nation? In effect: does the nationalist, cosmopolitan-elite have an ethical and political obligation to quit his/her employment with British companies now that independence has been achieved? In order to answer this question, the narrator reflects on the late colonial period, situating Sanad’s query in the context of a much larger history of cosmopolitan-elite experiences. The narrator describes Sanad’s experiences in the 1940s, reporting on and citing letters and conversations, and links these to stories of his own transformation from the son of an Indian textile magnate to a Gandhian activist in the 1920s. Amidst his many digressions, asides, and flashbacks, the narrator also recounts the tale of his own mentor, Sohan Bhai, yet another cosmopolitan-elite who had become an activist after a personal encounter with M. K. Gandhi. The reference to Gandhi, in turn, recalls his own narrative of elite metamorphosis that arguably sits at the heart of Indian nationalism. Gandhi’s widely read autobiography, Satya-na Prayogo (The Story of My Experiments With Truth, Gujarati, serialized from 1925–28), details his transition: from an Anglophile lawyer of the late Victorian period who spent hours starching his collar and learning ballroom dancing to a nationalist who donned the garb and lifestyle of the Indian peasantry in order to demonstrate his solidarity with them. This circulation and recirculation of narratives of elite political awakening across many generations of Indians, linking Sanad’s story to Gandhi’s own, is central to the ways in which the novel “validates [. . . ] the Gandhian strategies for emancipation” (Bhatnagar, Political 137). Having shored up these many overlapping narratives, the novel returns to the post-1947 moment toward its end, with the narrator giving his blessings to Sanad’s decision to remain at Selkirk and Lowe as long he works at deepening his cultural and political associations with India and the Indian people. Sanad still has many questions but,
the novel suggests, he is learning how to integrate the Indian and Western aspects of his identity and culture in the interests of self-advancement and national progress.

I am insisting on the primacy of the narrator’s role in the novel because he does not, on the surface, appear so crucial to it in comparison with Sanad. On the one hand, the narrator is unnamed and may appear to be a sloppily constructed character whose function is simply to report on and aid Sanad’s development toward an appropriate nationalist consciousness. At one point, the narrator even interrupts himself during an autobiographical aside in order to insist that this is “really Sanad’s story” (A Time 6). On the other hand, the novel appears to have two narrators, as the narrator cites Sanad directly quite often, having him speak to the reader in the first person for about one-third of the book. Accordingly, many of the novel’s critics regard the narrator’s haphazard methods of storytelling as evidence of Sahgal’s bad writing in this, her first novel. Meenakshi Mukherjee writes, for instance, that the novel suffers from a “basic confusion of point of view” as it “shifts uneasily between an impersonal observer, a narrative agent, and an omniscient author” (Twice-Born 50). Upon examining these uneasy narrative shifts more closely, however, we recognize that although the novel flits back and forth between the narrator’s and Sanad’s stories, it always remains under the firm control of the first-person narrator, who steers Sanad’s voice in a nationalist and even radical direction. By keeping the narrator nameless and offering Sanad’s story in the first person—that is, by employing “free indirect style”—the implied author seeks to make the narrator a relatively invisible agent. But it is under cover of this invisibility that the novel does its ideological work.

Free indirect style allows the implied author to employ Sanad’s voice in two ways. At times Sanad joins the narrator in his critique of both colonial oppression/racism and Indian sycophancy/self-centeredness. In these instances, Sanad is the model for what postcolonial elites ought to be like, for they are given a voice and an interiority only if, like Sanad, they begin to question the consequences of a life that takes them away from the nation. At other times Sanad himself exemplifies the conflicts and challenges of Indian elites, pulled away from a consideration of popular suffering by his desires for personal advancement. On the whole, Sanad is attempting to learn from the narrator how to comfortably move between “looking away” and “looking back”; the narrator’s steady and unwavering critique of colonialism and his portrayal of independence as the joyous subversion of racist hierarchies is offered as a reference point for the reader’s assessment of Sanad’s evolving consciousness. The following exam-
The physical retaking of occupied spaces at the end of the novel enables a thorough deconstruction of British-colonial identity. The placement of Kittering’s portrait reveals the central role that colonial historiography played in the day-to-day life of the British community, cementing Club-goers’ loyalties to counterinsurgency. In turn, the narrator’s casual dismissal of Kittering in the context of a victorious anticolonial struggle signifies a rewriting of that history. The narrator further tears down the façade of empire in commenting on the Club’s library, with its deep leather chairs, fireplace, and crimson carpets:

The library had obviously been designed by a man who dreamed of snowflakes drifting past the windows, of vintage port sipped in the depths of
an armchair, of warmth and plush on a wintry day. I wondered why he had not gone home to what he missed so much. For a moment the overpowering nostalgia of all those generations of exiles who had conjured up snowflakes in Sharanpur gripped me, and I felt sorry for them. How the demon sun must have mocked their fancies! (205)

These phrases and images invoke, and then invert, the discourse of colonialism. They reveal that the imperialist imagination that had turned India into an “island of make-believe” and adventure (205) was itself grounded in childish fictions. The phrase “demon sun” ironically positions us, for a moment, in the mindset of the imperialist before giving that Indian sun the agency to mock them. This critique of the British-colonial imaginary, reflected in the opinions of most of the British characters in the novel, is pointedly supported by repeated references to the fact that Indians had bodily taken over colonial spaces. Independence, here, is not an abstract political concept but the fact that, as the narrator gleefully reports, there were now “bare brown bodies beside the white ones splashing in the pool” at the Club (206). The narrator projects such a democratic glee regarding a whole range of social and political inversions. The late colonial days that, for him, had been full of hard work with little time to even think of pleasure “had for others been a time of gaiety,” whereas the moments he had entered into now were a “prelude to hard times” for loyalist Indians and the remaining British (236).

For the novel makes clear that it was not only British elites who saw independence as a “prelude to hard times.” Sanad’s Anglicized uncle, Harish, has finally moved up in the ranks of the Indian Civil Service only to find that the man on the rung above him was a despicable dhoti-wallah: the sort of person Harish had tried to avoid all his life (A Time 248). Meanwhile, Sanad’s father, Govind Narayan, cannot accept what Sanad calls “the age of the Common Man” and the new government’s plans to abolish the zamindari system of landownership that has been the cornerstone of his family’s wealth (243). The narrator and Sanad engage in full-frontal assaults on such loyalist and apolitical Indian elites. The narrator describes how Harish sees himself as playing a crucial part in Britain’s “civilizing mission”: “It was as if the white man, weary for a little while of his burden, had passed it on to Harish and he felt it an inestimable privilege to stagger under it [ . . . ] [His] entire outlook and manner had been so molded as to leave not the suspicion of an Indian about him. Had his complexion not been darker than the Englishman’s, not one distinguishing feature would have existed to vouch for his separate identity” (16–17).
Perfectly capturing the unique liminality of the sycophant, the narrator identifies the narrow “cocktail party–gymkhana-club–Government House-circuit” that produced such a creature (17). Like his British bosses, Harish would flee to the hill stations to avoid the heat of Indian summers, would never go to an Indian doctor, never wore Indian clothes, spoke with a British accent, and couldn’t appreciate Indian languages or poetry.

Sanad’s first-person accounts of his experiences in colonial cities such as Calcutta serve to augment the narrator’s critique of Anglicized Indians, for he can directly report from places where the narrator, with his dhoti and generational/cultural differences, cannot go. Calcutta’s “neon-lit nights, its air-conditioned cinemas, its exclusive clubs” (A Time 88) are a complete shock to Sanad. With “at least a half dozen night spots to choose from” (compared with Sharanpur’s single Club), Calcutta was a place, Sanad tells the narrator, where Europeans mingled with Harish-type men who “thumped one another on the back, called one another ‘I say, old chap,’ and sported the right school tie” (90). Sanad notes that only one year before the worst famine in the history of Bengal these individuals could avail themselves of tins of asparagus, caviar, and foie gras. The insularity and parochialism of this “cosmopolitan society” (89) suffocates Sanad: every day brought visits to the same clubs with the same people, talking about the same things.

Such criticisms underline the namak-halaal attitude that dominates the novel’s framework. But since Sanad himself is in a transitional stage, retelling his stories to the narrator in almost a confessional mode, the reader is made privy to the process by which political consciousness develops. Sanad is thus often both the subject and the object of critique. In another incident in Calcutta, accordingly, Sanad has an encounter with severe poverty that plays a crucial role in his political awakening. The setting is a dinner party at the home of Sir Ronu and Lady Lalita Chatterji, the center of Calcutta high society for Indians. Recently knighted for his services to the Empire, Sir Ronu sought contributions to help war widows of the Netherlands and starving children in Belgium—but with no attention, it is implied, to Indians who paid for the costs of World War II with their taxes, with food shortages, and with soldiers’ lives. The Chatterjis’ palatial house is marked as cosmopolitan and Western-oriented, featuring Italian upholstery, Venetian glass, and portraits of Lalita by French artists. Tired of the Chatterjis’ pretentiousness, Sanad drifts away and amuses himself “by watching the reflection of the chandeliers twinkle in the window panes” (A Time 100). He looks out one of the large windows that open onto the street and finds himself in the middle of a typically Sahgalian moment of epiphany:
I saw a little girl outside, begging, I suppose, with an even smaller child on her hip, looking up at the lights. If she was asking for alms I couldn’t hear her because the music was so loud. [ . . . ] Seeing me looking out, she raised [the child’s] filthy shirt, the only garment he had on, and showed me his jutting ribs. There was the barest covering of flesh on them. [ . . . ] Then one of the Chatterjis’ liveried **chapraasis** [guards] hurried out of the house and drove the child away [ . . . ] [When I angrily asked why he hadn’t given food for the child] the **chapraasi** looked at me in surprise. “The food would have done him no good, sahib. He was already dead. [ . . . ] He has been dead for hours. [ . . . ] The girl was here this morning and he was dead then.”

I had an insane desire to rush into the salon, stop the music, and shout “Silence!” (98)

Sanad’s first-person narration allows us direct access to his sudden shock, not only regarding the depth of poverty and deprivation but also at the macabre acts that the poor need to perform in order to get even a cursory recognition from the wealthy.

But the driving force of the passage is not the “barest covering of flesh” on the child’s “jutting ribs” but the ways in which Sanad tries to grapple with this brush with extreme hunger. Sanad’s attempt to communicate beyond the charmed circle of elite space is repeatedly frustrated. Initially, we are hopeful that the gap between Indian elites and the poor might be bridged. Sanad is forced to shift his gaze from elite, private spaces, “watching the reflection of the chandeliers twinkle” in the windows, to public ones: to look outside to the street in order to see the girl who is also “looking up at the lights.” Oppositions of class are mapped onto the imagery of light/dark, as the reflections in the windows and the girl’s attraction to the lights imply that it is dark outside but bright within. For an instant, the very lights that divide elite/poor, inside/outside seem as if they will unite them, as the scene creates a cinematic eyeline match between Sanad and the girl (“seeing me looking out”). Immediately, however, a series of obstacles to Sanad’s empathy appears as the elite space goes into lockdown mode. It becomes impossible to know what the girl wants; he “couldn’t hear her” because of the loud music. Then the **chapraasi**, whose job is to patrol Lady Chatterji’s borders, steps in and removes the girl, closing the spatial breach she had briefly created.

Since Sahgal constructs the **chapraasi** as more than a faceless guard, however, the latter allows the reader to linger around the dead boy a bit more. A liminal figure by virtue of his position—he communicates with
elites but is also situated on the margins—the *chapprassi* actually interacts with the girl, and it is *his* knowledge that enables Sanad’s politicization. Initially, thinking himself to be the enlightened one, Sanad had come running to the door of the house and scolded the *chapprassi* for showing the girl the door and saying that he “would have given her something to eat” (*A Time* 98). But it is the *chapprassi* who is constructed as being much more in touch with reality as he reveals the secret of the girl’s performance with the corpse. To restore the last set of ellipses in the passage above: “He has been dead for hours,” he said matter-of-factly. ‘The girl was here this morning’” (98). These phrases illuminate, with the suddenness of a rifle shot, the depth of the elites’ disengagement with both the girl and the *chapprassi*, as Sanad is literally shocked into silence. For the *chapprassi*, who responds “matter-of-factly,” the girl’s situation is not an occasion for melodrama or ontological crisis but one of the many, daily tragedies emerging with the onset of famine. Sanad thinks about taking action, desiring to “shout ‘Silence!’” in an attempt to bring the “outside” in, but even now his elite conditioning prevents him from embarrassing his hosts. Humbled, he stays with the *chapprassi*, who says, bitingly, that there is “not enough human pity for all the corpses we shall soon see [ . . . ] Already the people are straggling in from the villages. The smell of death is about them” (98–99).

This passage, narrating the suffering of the people with tremendous sympathy and calling for the elite to learn how to recognize this pain, draws forth a trope that exists in many pre-Emergency texts and-harkens back, indeed, to late colonial Indian English novels such as Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable* (1935) and Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* (1938). Taking the narrator’s and Sanad’s stories together, *A Time to Be Happy* champions the reclamation of Indian spaces and histories against colonial racism, the criticism of Eurocentric Indian elites, and the recognition of the extreme impact of colonialism on the poor. With Sahgal’s novels in particular, there is a consistent attempt to expose and disrupt the cloistered experiences of elite characters through moments that reveal the daily tragedies and emergencies of subaltern life; the texts’ explicit aim to challenge elitist bias despite focusing on elite characters. Nevertheless, the ways in which the novel resolves Sanad’s crises raises questions about the narrator’s understanding of the nation in relation to the people. Increasingly, the novel’s acceptance of elite nationalism and the subsequent diminishing of class conflicts lead to a privileging of elite voices. Despite its sympathy toward the marginalized and oppressed, the text is unable to envision them as central to the project of liberation.¹¹
Mclvor’s New Cosmopolitanism

In *The Black Man’s Burden*, Basil Davidson distinguishes elite nationalism from populist, revolutionary nationalism by dubbing the former as “nation-statism.” I use this term to signify a perspective whose ultimate concept of liberation from colonialism entails the achievement of a capitalist nation-state that can eke out a space for itself within the global marketplace. As *A Time to Be Happy* draws to its conclusion, the “nation-statist” elements of the Nehruvian nationalism to which it adheres become more apparent, rendering it more of an elite-centered, rather than subaltern-centered, text. Three basic elements of this shift away from the people stand out, modifying the novel’s earlier, intransigent critiques of British racism and elite self-centeredness: 1) the prominence that the implied author eventually grants to the voice of Mclvor, Sanad’s new boss at Selkirk and Lowe; 2) the text’s insistence on compromise and not confrontation with loyalist elites; and 3) the marginalization of subaltern voices. Under the guise of a progressive critique of nativism, the text ultimately turns ordinary Indians into the backdrop against which elites perform their historical roles.

Despite the discourse of Indian self-determination that constitutes the novel on the most basic level, it is Mclvor—not the narrator—who best articulates the framework through which the novel portrays the historic task of elites in postcolonial India. Soon after independence, Sanad, Mclvor, and the narrator begin to spend time socially, often talking deep into the night about the problems of postcoloniality. In one instance, Sanad talks about subaltern suffering and openly expresses his exasperation with his isolation and impotence as an Anglicized elite:

> You know, Mr. Mclvor, it is a strange feeling to be midway between two worlds, not completely belonging to either. I don’t belong entirely to India. I can’t. My education, my upbringing, and my sense of values have all combined to make me un-Indian. What do I have in common with most of my countrymen? And of course there can be no question of my belonging to any other country. I could not feel at home anywhere else. *(A Time 147)*

Sanad’s lament stems from a sense of commitment to the nation: the elites ought to have “something in common” with their countrymen but do not have “the gift of mixing outside their own class” (147). This confusion is the postcolonial echo of the native intellectual’s concerns in the colonial
period, what Frantz Fanon calls the “second stage” of politicization: “[A]t the moment when the nationalist parties are mobilizing the people in the name of national independence, the native intellectual sometimes spurns these [Western cultural] acquisitions which he suddenly feels make him a stranger in his own land” (The Wretched of the Earth 219). Significantly, Sanad says not that he no longer feels at home in India but, in fact, that he “could not feel at home anywhere else”; his alienation still comes from a space of postcolonial mourning that is oriented toward the nation, not away from it. This sense of “not completely belonging” anywhere is more like the aesthetics of interwar modernism, in which “desolations of the self were still experienced quite frequently as a loss,” than like the postmodernist model, in which “belonging nowhere is [. . .] construed as the perennial pleasure of belonging everywhere” (A. Ahmad, In Theory 157).

The text’s expression of the dilemmas that inflict Western-educated, colonized elites, at this point, is not elitist in and of itself. But it becomes so when the narrator and Sanad uncritically accept McIvor’s response as a way to resolve these tensions. McIvor provides a veritable manifesto for elites—whether belonging to the early postcolonial period or today’s class of “Global Indians”—who seek to garnish their transnational profiteering with a nationalist flavor:

[Y]ou have the great advantage, with your background, of being able to feel at home among people of your class anywhere in the world. [. . .] Treat [your upbringing] as the link between India and the rest of the world, an indispensable link because so few of your countrymen [. . .] dress as you do, so few [. . .] speak English, and so few have the education which you say sets you apart from India. [. . .] It is incumbent upon you to maintain this link and strengthen it. The world is in need of a universal culture, a universal language. (A Time 147–48)

McIvor rewrites what Sanad had expressed as the cosmopolitan’s handicap of “not belonging” as a “great advantage,” a tool by which Sanad can belong to both India and the world. McIvor’s observation that Sanad could “feel at home among people of [his] class anywhere in the world” is actually an invitation, an effort to impress upon Sanad that his English education and Western dress given him the unique opportunity to be an Indian representative in a transnational club of elites. Indeed, McIvor gives the forging of such links between the national and the international realms an activist charge by articulating it as a categorical imperative (“It is incumbent upon you . . .”).
Sahgal’s *A Time to Be Happy* and Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* were published only a few years apart, but the McIvor passages illustrate the vast ideological gap between them. McIvor’s proposed cosmopolitan identity for Indian elites of the early postcolonial period—one that corresponds to their subject positions as managers and capitalists in the new nation—is the inverted image, point-by-point, of Fanon’s “first-stage” native intellectual who, though beginning to think self-critically, remains oriented toward the West:

The intellectual who is Arab and French, or Nigerian and English, when he comes up against the need to take on two nationalities, chooses, if he wants to remain true to himself, the negation of one of these determinations. But most often, since they cannot or will not make a choice, such intellectuals gather together all the historical determining factors which have conditioned them and take up a fundamentally “universal standpoint.” (218)

In criticizing this “universal standpoint” Fanon is not celebrating parochialism: the argument of *The Wretched of the Earth* ultimately rests upon the need for a radical anticolonial nationalism to develop into a genuine internationalism based on popular solidarity across national borders. At this point, however, Fanon portrays the impulse toward “universalism” as the inability or unwillingness (“cannot or will not”) to ally oneself with a rebellious nationalism. But what Fanon describes as a political deficiency is, in *A Time to Be Happy*, precisely what McIvor prescribes as a solution: Sanad ought to refrain from “the negation” of one of the worlds to which he belongs. If we look at this through Fanon’s schema, Sanad is moving backwards from a realization of his alienation (“second stage”) to a desire for a “universal standpoint” that, in McIvor’s discourse, is to be equated with the perspective of a transnational elite. In Gramscian terms, this is an “imperial-universal” standpoint that is diametrically opposed to the secular and progressive versions of the “national-popular” that are forged by the subaltern-centered, “organic” intellectual.12

Indeed, McIvor’s suggestion that Sanad is an “indispensable link” between ordinary Indians and the world can be read, ironically, as the postcolonial fulfillment of the British administration’s goals during the activist phase of “cultural reform” that had ended with the Revolt of 1857. In his infamous “Minute on Education” (1835), Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay had written:
We must [. . .] do our best to form a class who may be the interpreters between us and the millions we govern; a class of persons Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in moral, in intellect. To the class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country [. . .] and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population. (Macaulay)

Although the colonial administration’s policies regarding intervention in Indian education and culture fluctuated between direct involvement and (alleged) noninterference—a tension that ultimately resolved itself in the formation of English literary studies (Viswanathan 38)—Macaulay’s class of Indians with English tastes became a reality of colonial India. As studies of early- to mid-nineteenth-century debates on Indian education make clear, inculcating Englishness was widely seen as crucial to fortifying the hold of the East India Company on its colonies. In the struggle to overthrow colonialism, accordingly, an important segment of this English-educated class enacted Fanon’s “negation,” advocating various strands of cultural nationalism. Sanad’s confusion initially appears to be the narrative of such a negation—the novel is replete with self-critical statements such as “I might as well be an Englishman except for the color of my skin” (A Time 232)—but his final acceptance of his Englishness in the interests of becoming a representative for the Indian bourgeoisie represents the negation of that negation. The class elements of this discourse about culture, which McIvor openly recognizes, ought not to be forgotten: in the context of Sanad’s employment as an officer in a multinational textile corporation, his Englishness is not really a link between the people of India and the world but instead is that between a potential Indian market and a British firm seeking to maximize its profits. McIvor’s cosmopolitan paradigm is one that completely fits Indian “nation-statist” goals, as well as British imperialist ones.

One consequence of the novel’s acceptance of McIver’s paradigm as a resolution to Sanad’s dilemmas is the surprising resuscitation of characters previously discarded as racist and elitist. As the novel progresses from the late colonial to the early postcolonial periods, Sanad and the narrator engage in friendly debate and dialogue with characters who mourn the passage of the British, including Tom and Dora Grange, Harish, and the Chatterjis. We are reminded of Krishnan’s insistence, from the second epigraph, that after independence the British and Indians “stood or fell together.” Tom Grange, for instance, is absolutely prejudiced against
Indians’ ability to rule themselves effectively—but Sanad continues to meet with him socially in order to argue politics. The reduction of the sphere of nationalist struggle to the level of friendly disagreements with pro-colonial elites undermines the other crucial aspect of the novel’s representation of the committed cosmopolitan: a sense of responsibility to ordinary people. For all its value in terms of Sanad’s politicization, the Calcutta scene involving the beggar girl, cited above, ends with a whimper. Sanad stays for dinner with Sir Ronu and his wife, Lalita, and participates fully in the dancing and merriment that follows—with no attention to his earlier critique of elite self-absorption. There is little textual indication that the implied audience ought to be critical of Sanad for this obliviousness.

What I am reading as a mark of the text’s ambiguous politics is, in fact, explicitly constructed as a willful lack of closure. For instance, despite having decided to stay at Selkirk and Lowe, Sanad still represents a work-in-progress—but it is unclear, now, whether the narrator regards this as a failure or as evidence of a necessary process in the configuration of a new identity. On the one hand, Sanad desires to assert his Westernness: he joins the Club as soon as he can and is elated when Kusum Sahai, his newly married wife from a staunchly Gandhian and traditionalist family, agrees to wear high heels and drink liquor at office parties in order to fit into his world. On the other hand, he refuses to go abroad on company work until he can “go as an individual instead of as the carbon copy of an English man,” and tries to learn a little Hindi from Kusum in order to read the recently published book of patriotic poems by her brother Sahdev, martyred in the Quit India uprising (A Time 267). Sanad, thus, has acquired all of the various accoutrements of cultural and political nationalism: he learns how to sit cross-legged and how to wear a dhoti, and his alliance with Kusum’s nationalist and indigent family is clearly marked as a political act. The narrator observes all of this but explicitly refrains from counseling Sanad too much, seeing his development as part of a process that “will work out in time” (231). Echoing McIvor exactly, he rewrites Sanad’s frustration about his divided self into strength: “The more elements that combine to make us, the more integrated we shall be as human beings, with a better understanding of those elements” (232). We have, then, both the desire for coherence and an explicit avoidance of closure. The novel continues to emphasize the process over the product, which applies as much to Sanad as to the nation itself (“One can have an ugly child [. . . ]”). The lack of closure is portrayed as an expression of the narrator’s patience with emerging developments—solutions will emerge “in time.” As we have seen, however, what is being presented as the inte-
The ending of the novel attempts to exhibit the productive tensions engendered by the lack of closure and continuation of dialogue, but its representation of Indian modernity reveals a suspicion, in spite of itself, that the modern nation had already discarded subaltern concerns. The handicrafts fair that culminates Village Industries Week, an event the narrator has organized, functions as a microcosm of the ideal nation that the novel has sought to achieve—in which differences and dialogue are encouraged as the mark of progress. On the one hand, the Fair is charged with anticolonial symbolism. The items on display, handicrafts and handspun cloth used to great effect in the anticolonial struggle, glorify the culture of the kisan (peasant) as both artisan and producer. The site at which the Fair takes place symbolically reclaims what was an exclusive enclave for British leisure; as the narrator triumphantly tells the portrait of Sir Kittering, “It is time to relent, Sir Charles. [. . . ] [T]he natives are swarming all over the Polo Grounds [. . . ]” (A Time 272). On the other hand, the narrator welcomes and even highlights the asymmetries and ironies involved in the coming together of persons of different nationalities, classes, and ideologies. In one booth, for instance, we see Sanad squatting in his neatly creased trousers and shiny black shoes, failing miserably at using a charkha (spinning wheel) yet waving proudly at the shocked British bosses of Selkirk and Lowe who walk by, disturbed by his “primitive” behavior. Again, there is more than a little irony reserved for the “distinguished patron[s] of the cottage industry” (260) who arrive with much fanfare—including Sir Ronu and Lady Chatterji, who have transformed into nationalist philanthropists now that the ruling party has changed. Nothing here is contradictory to the imagined nation of A Time to Be Happy, which constructs closure as the cessation of dialogue. Through the spectacle of the Fair, the novel aims to leaves its implied audience with a question that it does not seek to resolve: how will the urban-capitalist modernity emerging in the first decade of Nehru’s India relate to the Gandhian economic models that tied the countryside to the nation throughout the anticolonial struggle?

The uncertainty surrounding this question, however, suggests that the novel secretly knows the answer: modern industry has already won. The narrative shifts from a celebration of “unity in diversity” to a troubled meditation on the implicit contradictions between the new Nehruvian India of modern industry and the one imagined by the romantic anticapitalist visions of Gandhi. The many ideological and symbolic contradictions in Village Industries Week rebound upon the narrative, as it
were, by presenting questions that its framework, resting on the narrative of development-as-progress, cannot process. At one point, the novel allows us to listen in on a debate between Sir Ronu and Sanad, in which Sir Ronu openly mocks Village Industries Week as an archaic anomaly. The exchange is still friendly, but the novel now depicts as problematic the way in which formally loyalist capitalists both claim association with Gandhism, the peasantry, and handicrafts, and mock them, pouring investments into large-scale textile magnates such as Selkirk and Lowe. The narrator does not know what to do with this fact. His description of the Fair increasingly takes on a defensive tone, and he conjures up a romanticized vision of the purity of peasant work in order to drive away the suspicion that village handicrafts are merely symbolic and will always be marginal to the Indian economy. Making his rounds through the Fair, the narrator insists that he is filled with peace: what mattered was not the quality of the handicrafts but their very existence. This was proof, he contests, that “the machine age had not robbed the people of their prowess or their faith. The kisan’s [peasant’s] art would survive as long as he himself survived” (273). The “ugliness” of the handicrafts must be tolerated, just as Veena tolerates the refugees fleeing Partition violence and arriving in Delhi. The narrator’s comment on the kisan is indicative of a namak-halaal sensibility unavailable to most post-Emergency novels, but the passage is unaware of the simultaneous processes of romanticization and objectification of the kisan that it engenders.

The narrator’s vision then pans up and out to give us a topography of the polo grounds, acknowledging the tension in the new nation and assuring us of the continuing presence of the people and their art: “The polo grounds were ringed about by a circle of tall trees, and beyond them rose smoke of the mills and factories. But here within this peaceful circle were the enduring things, the immemorial Indian things, tranquilly displayed. To me each painted toy and article of wood was a symbol of courage and the determination to survive” (A Time 272). The implicit critique of the factories and smokestacks surrounding the Fair is a testament to the narrator’s desire that the modern nation remain people-centered, that the mills not wipe out the kisans and their handspun cloth. The narrator tries to invert the power relations, to decenter modernity—configuring the handicrafts that lay in the “peaceful circle” as the real, “immemorial” core of the new India. But this attempt to construct a safe haven for rural India only mirrors the fictitious world of the library in the Club: a space of escape from the brutal realities of modern life. The narrator insists upon reading the Fair as the fruit of the anticolonial struggle, buttressing his
argument by returning to the Club and talking tough to Sir Kittering, but this confrontation seems far less real than the one between Sanad and Sir Ronu at the bar—in which Indian elites, not the British, stand in the way of a people-centered nation. The narrator is effectively caught in a contradiction, for Sanad, his protégé, is, after all, nothing but “the representative of a textile empire” (230). The narrator, though he does not admit it often, knows how different Sanad is from Sahdev, the former still “struggling to reach” the plateau achieved by the latter (230).

The narrator can only leave Sanad behind and escape from the suffocating Club into the “hot, jasmine-scented darkness” of an Indian night (272), embracing the heat and smells of an indigenous space whose construction as exotic, here, distances it from everything that is Western and modern. The anticlimactic ending unintentionally leaves us with an impression of Indian postcoloniality that is far less jubilant than one suggested by the novel’s title. It says implicitly what the narrator refuses to say: the mills and steel towns have already won.13 While the rural handicrafts are held up as a symbol of true self-reliance and reminders of the heroic anticolonial struggle, the reality is that capitalist modernity, led by Indian elites and aided by British firms, was already looming over the new nation, inevitable and forbidding like the smokestacks over the polo grounds, ripping the old Gandhian vision apart.

Interrogating Postcolonial Identities

Like A Time to Be Happy, Kamala Markandaya’s The Coffer Dams is also committed to a version of national freedom that does not leave behind subaltern groups. It too combines a critique of British imperialism with a rejection of a narrow anti-British chauvinism, championing interracial and interethnic dialogue and seeking out transnational alliances. But The Coffer Dams, like Markandaya’s A Handful of Rice (1966), is a subaltern-centered novel that portrays Indian modernity and its complex subjects very differently than A Time to Be Happy. The novel pits the aggressive industrial-capitalism of the Indian government and its British partners, the dam-building firm of Clinton and Mackendrick, Ltd., against the Adivasis (indigenous peoples) who inhabit the marginalized zones of the new nation-state and are being driven off their settlement. Markandaya’s text leaves no doubt, as it were, that the factories and smokestacks of modern industry have already choked and engulfed the “peaceful circle” of the people.
Chapter 2

*The Coffer Dams* tells a story, in fact, about that postcolonial violence. Every challenge that the British firm must overcome—building on the difficult terrain of a forested hillside, planning a timetable around the monsoon, maintaining the pace of the work, and keeping labor peace—is embedded with the problems of postcoloniality. Constructing the dam means displacing the Adivasis, a fact that creates ethical conflicts between the characters and exacerbes, in turn, the racial and ethnic divisions among managers and workers and between workers themselves. At times the opposition between capitalist modernity and humanity comes to a head and characters are faced with stark choices: should they “look away” toward a modern Indian future, or “look back” to lives that would be displaced? For the completion of the dam project entails looking away while Adivasis are displaced and killed—and fighting obstacles such as the monsoon and mudslides that are portrayed in the novel as the resistance of the land and environment themselves to capitalist modernity. While these larger oppositions (industry/humanity; machines/nature) establish the basic conflicts of the text, the novel maintains a focus on characters who begin to question their given roles in the drama, to challenge the prison houses of the identities that have been assigned to them by history and society.

Like *A Time to Be Happy*, *The Coffer Dams* does its work through an investigation of its characters’ shifting identities, and their perceptions of these shifts, over the course of the narrative. The moments of tension in the text emerge when the two protagonists are forced to question social hierarchies and expectations. Helen Clinton, the chief builder’s wife, educates herself about the Adivasis’ plight and becomes a fierce advocate for them even at the risk of breaking up her marriage. Bashiam, an Adivasi himself and now a crane operator for the British firm, excels at his work but finds that no amount of technical skill can prevent him from being denigrated, by the British and Indians alike, for his origins. Helen’s and Bashiam’s trajectories cross somewhat as they become friends and, temporarily, lovers, but their challenges are different. Helen recognizes and struggles against her Orientalist tendencies as she defends the Adivasis against an encroaching modernity, whereas Bashiam, relatively uncritical of modernity and a subscriber to a Horatio Algerian myth of bootstraps, seeks to prove that Adivasi birth is no barrier to becoming a skilled, modern worker. Nevertheless, the actions of each—dialectically linked to those of nature itself, the transcendent antagonist of modernity as the text represents it—are central to the plot and drive the novel to its divided and ambiguous conclusion.

The representations of postcolonial identity in *The Coffer Dams*
develop amidst the severity of its critique of modernity and its contradictions. When an early monsoon disrupts the best-laid plans of the increasingly despotic Clinton, the builders are forced to make several decisive choices. The first is to increase production to a twenty-four-hour cycle, breaking the natural sequences of time and dragging more and more impoverished Adivasis out of the hills to meet the labor shortage. Adivasis thus receive a wage for the construction of the very dams that are destroying their homes, “a perpetuating circle that gained momentum as the dam drained men from the tribe” (The Coffer Dams 167). The breakneck speed of production results, in turn, in a number of workplace fatalities and injuries, with the biggest explosion resulting in the death of forty Adivasi workers. Recovering the bodies of the dead in accordance with Adivasi traditions, however, would require moving a massive boulder and setting back the timetable—so Clinton and his associates decide to forgo the effort. The boulder can be made part of the dam, they reason, and the men’s “bodies can be incorporated. Into the structure” (188). The short, choppy sentences articulate the cold, deliberate logic of modernity, in which the dams literally swallow up indigenous bodies.

As tensions rise between the British, the Adivasis, and the Indians, who have decided to put aside their prejudices and unite with the latter in protest of British inhumanity, Bashiam steps in on the side of the dam-builders—partly in secret atonement to Clinton for sleeping with Helen and partly in order to recover the bodies, but largely because he wants the challenge of operating the new Avery-Kent crane that no one else can handle. This element of Bashiam’s characterization is extremely important, for it shows Markandaya’s sensitivity to a contradiction that cannot be easily answered, namely that in a world dominated by modern, capitalist structures, progress on the level of both society and the individual becomes defined in terms of advancement within those structures—no matter how violent and disruptive they may be. For Bashiam, his personal liberation from poverty is always tied to his ability to master Western machinery, and Clinton and Rawlings take advantage of his eagerness, allowing him to operate the crane even though they know that it is defective. His devotion to modernity betrays him: Bashiam eventually moves the boulder out, anchoring the faulty crane with the strength of his body, but his backbone breaks, adding another Adivasi casualty to the total. Still, even though he returns to the Adivasi village for rest and recovery, Bashiam sets out to work on new modernization projects as soon as he is well. The novel clearly depicts postcoloniality as violent and the new nation-state as treacherous, seeking the aid of and enriching the former colonizers in
the effort to control nature at all costs. But there are no easy resolutions, and the ambiguity of the ending also confirms this. It becomes clear that the dams still will not be completed on time, and that the “coffer dams” at the foundation will have to be broken apart immediately if the coming monsoon rains are not to drown the Adivasi villages. Clinton, increasingly dehumanized in his desperation to conquer India, its people, and its weather, refuses to breach the coffer dams for any reason whatsoever. The tension is defused, however, when the rains, existentially allied with the Adivasi cause, end unexpectedly. We are left with an ambiguous ending as categories and spaces previously constructed as oppositional are shown, suddenly, to coexist: the village is saved and the coffer dams remain standing. We have then the clear outlines of a politics that draws attention to the excesses of postcolonial modernity and the problems of identity it throws up—but also an unwillingness to resolve these questions in any simple way.

Thus, in terms of how it depicts protagonists and antagonists, *The Coffer Dams* offers fairly clear-cut dichotomies between capitalist modernity and popular welfare, between the interests of elites and nonelites, (ex-) colonizers and (post)colonized. Unlike the more sympathetic approach to Selkirk and Lowe in *A Time to Be Happy*, British characters in Markandaya’s novel are constructed as sympathetic only to the extent that they shift their positions against the British complicity in postcolonial suffering. Helen, for instance, moves further and further away from her husband and the dam project as she develops a greater understanding of Indian realities and boundaries. She earns her place in the novel, as it were, by refusing the role of neocolonial memsahib: mingling with the Adivasis, learning their language, and ultimately becoming a spokeswoman for them. She is thus in basic opposition to McIvor in *A Time to Be Happy*, who is allowed to hold forth on the benefits of British firms to the new India. Helen knows the material facts beneath the rhetoric: along with the Americans, West Germans, Russians, and the Dutch, the British are simply seeking “to gain a foothold in an expanding subcontinent of vast commercial potential” (*The Coffer Dams* 12). Subsequently, Helen also stands in opposition to Sanad, as her version of becoming an “indispensable link” between the people and the world is centered around the people and not herself—and this despite the fact that she is not Indian. Indeed, there are no nationalist saviors here, as it is the Indian elites themselves who are welcoming the multinationals into the nation. The deep critique of imperialism in *The Coffer Dams*, thus, emerges out of a representation of the new nation-state as a willing participant in the Western exploitation of its own resources and people.
One might expect that in a social-realist novel, such a stark political opposition to postcolonial modernity would result in a cookie-cutter approach to characterization and voice. No so. Despite its thorough critique of the ongoing British interest in India and the characters who defend it, paradoxically, it develops British characters to a far greater extent than does *A Time to Be Happy*. While Sahgal's text resuscitates and makes sympathetic all of its British characters, engaging in friendly debate with them, their viewpoints are firmly ensconced within those of the first-person, reliable narrator. The reader of *A Time to Be Happy* always approaches British characters from the outside. On the contrary, *The Coffer Dams* is much more didactic. Its third-person, omniscient narrator has no difficulty in marking characters as racist, sexist, or generally unlikable. But the interiority of British characters, such as Clinton, Helen, Mackendrick, Rawlings, the chief engineer, and Millie, Rawlings's wife, is developed to such a degree through the usage of free indirect style that they become three-dimensional, with human frailties and motivations mixed in with their political and cultural outlooks. This narrative strategy disrupts any easy association between racial, ethnic, or national identity and political outlook, and places greater value on where a character stands on the question of modernity than who s/he is. Certainly, the novel's politics tell us clearly where our sympathies should lie, but in terms of character and voice the text is far more interested in movement than stasis. Clinton's trajectory from liberalism to brutality is given more attention than the motivations of the consistently open-minded and kindhearted Mackendrick. The brooding Krishnan has much more of a voice than his Indian co-workers Gopal and Shanmugham, despite the fact that it is the latter who slowly learn to overcome their prejudices against Adivasis. Bashiam challenges stereotypes by actually glorifying the dam project—with classic Nehruvian gusto—and exhibiting a real distaste for Adivasi life. Helen's complete rejection of modernity makes her, in fact, a better spokesperson for the indigenous cause than Bashiam—even though the text is self-conscious about the problems of Orientalism.

*The Coffer Dams*, therefore, does not privilege any particular aspect of identity, whether nationality, race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, or class, as automatically endowing a character with a critical knowledge of modernity's consequences—or, for that matter, as barring him/her from such a knowledge. Rather, it investigates the relationship between identity and ideology and the potential for change. While some characters are clearly fixed in order to anchor the novel's politics (Clinton, the Adivasis), the characters who do transform are drawn from the same identity groups
(Helen and Bashiam, respectively) in order to combat essentialist representations. The novel thus exhibits both a firm loyalty toward the Adivasis and recognition of the dynamism of cultural and political identity. It draws a firm line between the powerful and the powerless, even while offering, on the level of narrative, a perspective into the viewpoints of people who are on either side of that line—and thereby opening up the possibility that they might shift across it.

The question thus becomes not simply about locating the presence of “hybridity” but in asking about the kinds of hybrids that exist and can come into being, about the limits and possibilities of cross-cultural mixing. While those who champion and benefit from modernity are able to turn their cross-cultural experiences to nefarious ends, Helen and Bashiam are “elite” only in a relative and contingent sense as their gender and their ethnicity, respectively, turn them both into “freaks” (157). Their marginality is emphasized decisively by the two main dramatic moments of the text: when Helen is raped by her husband after an argument about the British role in a free India, and when Bashiam breaks his back. The rape puts Helen outside the pale of “Englishness” and everything it signifies, a punishment for mixing with the natives and refusing to recognize Clinton’s firm order to stay away from them: “Not our country, not our people. Nothing to do with us” (145). Likewise, the accident—severely injuring Bashiam and taking away the abilities that allowed him to rise above ethnic and class oppression—thrusts him out of the dam-building modernity that he so admires and back into the Adivasi identity that he had been trying to escape (234). Hybridity and newness, here, are not special modes of cultural mixing or consciousness that can cross all borders. Rather, they are by-products of modern life that can be used either to cement hierarchies or to challenge them. While the representatives of modernity employ their cross-cultural experiences and knowledges in the interests of the status quo, Helen’s and Bashiam’s “hybridities” are portrayed as threatening and in need of correction because they stand against the violent logic of that modernity.

The Postcolonial Memsahib and the Adivasi Engineer

Let’s investigate a bit more closely the kinds of hybridity expressed by Helen and Bashiam as they shift and transform through the text. With Homi K. Bhabha’s work in the 1990s, especially *The Location of Culture* (1994), “hybridity” began its long reign as a dominant theoretical
term in Postcolonial Studies—one that is, in turn, central to concepts of cosmopolitan experience and knowledge. As a student in the field quickly learns, “hybridity” is posited as the “good” term that stands in opposition to “bad” ones such as “binary opposition” and “essentialism.” Bhabha’s specific role in the postmodernization of Postcolonial Studies has been to problematize the colonizer/colonized dyad. Borrowing liberally from both Foucauldian and Derridean discourses, Bhabha has argued that there is no clear dividing line between colonizers and colonized, that such terms are homogenizing and essentialist, and that a great variety of alternative, hybrid subjectivities have existed across this false divide. As several historicist critics have noted over the years, while Bhabha’s model may have helped to raise important questions about the construction of both colonial discourse and its national antagonist, his method tends to minimize the materiality of colonialism and colonial oppression: the ways in which a series of specific economic, political, and legal processes did, in fact, dichotomize colonial societies into the subjectivities of colonizer and colonized. Hidden beneath debates around Bhabha’s hybridity, quite often, are disagreements about the relative materiality of different sets of oppositions. Are all binary oppositions equally constructed and, implicitly, equally false ways of viewing the world? On the flip side, are all hybridities equally liberating, and what exactly does the mixture consist of? How does one judge the truth-values of different hybrid configurations?

Reading *The Coffer Dams* suggests that we question a critical model in which all binary oppositions are marked as being worthy of debunking, that some oppositions exist in order to obfuscate the operation of power while others have actually helped to analyze and critique a world of oppression, suffering, and war. The novel’s characters allow us to conceptualize a more materialist and historicist notion of hybridity by revealing that social and political identities can be fluid even when the lines between oppressor and oppressed are fairly thick and deeply rooted. In *The Coffer Dams*, binary oppositions that justify oppression are dismantled as false, but those that reveal its presence are maintained and emphasized. Crossing boundaries in the face of a rigid hierarchy of power is upheld in the interest of preserving notions of truth, justice, and the possibility of knowledge. On the flip side, a championing of hybridity and cross-cultural experience that leads to the perpetuation of oppression is represented by the novel as being either manipulative or ignorant.

In Helen and Bashiam, *The Coffer Dams* offers a careful study of different hybridities and their manifestations. Let’s take, for instance, Helen’s initial curiosity about the Adivasis and the way in which she negotiates the
line between genuine cross-cultural understanding and the opportunistic appropriation of another culture. With time on her hands and an unfamiliar world to explore, Helen comes to know about the “hill-people” and tries to find out more about them, visiting a few settlements and reminding us forcefully of the kinds of Orientalist sentiments that have become associated with journals such as *National Geographic*. Here, Helen is deliberately constructed as naïve, unmindful of history and the political and cultural tensions underlying the relationships between the British, the Indians, and the Adivasis. At one point, for instance, she asks Krishnan about his opinion on the “impermanent, flyway foundations” on which the Adivasis built their homes and their lives (51). Helen does not know what the third-person omniscient narrator promptly tells us, that Krishnan, a Tamil Brahmin from the plains, “despise[s] Helen for thinking that he [. . . ] could be familiar with any aspect of the half-savage hill people’s lives” (51). And yet, despite his own loathing for the Adivasis, Krishnan “close[s] the Indian ranks [. . . ] decisively” and replies in a polemic whose roots Helen cannot comprehend: “‘Of course they seem flyaway to you, you are used to better things. Unfortunately our people are not. They’ve become used to being done out of their rights’” (51).

The third-person narration performs several tasks simultaneously. In terms of Helen, it reveals her concern for the Adivasis but also her complete lack of knowledge about historical and cultural differences among the inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent. History, we are told, “still largely lay between the covers of a book” for Helen, “dissociate[d] from [. . . ] human reality”; learning about the “humiliations of being an underdeveloped and pauper nation” might allow her to understand Krishnan’s bitter reply (52). And yet, even while asserting the importance of understanding the colonizer/colonizer divide in postcolonial encounters and Krishnan’s greater knowledge in this regard, the narrator reveals the arrogance of Krishnan’s construct of “civilized Indians” and “savage Adivasis.” We are shown that both Helen and Krishnan operate around false constructs about “Indians,” even as it is emphasized that the *history* of colonial and ethnic oppression in India is real and important. We are shown both that Helen’s curiosity smacks of Orientalist ignorance and that her continued search for knowledge about the Adivasis is superior to Krishnan’s, because his opportunistic closing of “Indian” ranks ultimately legitimizes the violence of mainstream nationalist discourse and nation-statism. “Our people,” in Krishnan’s usage, is shown to be just empty rhetoric that masks the oppression of Adivasis by the nation.

Thus, Krishnan’s specific way of employing the opposition between
“Indians” and “British” is shown to be a false construct even as the division of colonizer and colonized, as engendered by history, is represented as real. We have, as it were, different gradations of binary oppositions: colonial oppression creates the context for the formation of a national identity which is useful in overthrowing that oppression, but buying into that identity in perpetuity, especially after decolonization, suppresses racial and ethnic variety and difference within the nation. Initially, Helen seeks to leap over the historical divide through an idealist act of will and is rebuffed by Krishnan. But because Helen does not then revert back to the memsahib, ruling-class subject position that is available to her but actually pushes ahead for greater knowledge and communication, she is able to go beyond Krishnan’s national fictions. In Hogan’s terminology, Helen reshapes her “practical identity” by gaining “competence” in another culture. It is in this capacity that she is made sympathetic to the implied audience.

Helen soon encounters Bashiam, who becomes, the narrator informs us, her “link man” to the Adivasis’ language and cultural practices (52). Again, given the deep entrenchment of Foucauldian paradigms of power/knowledge in literary and cultural studies, it might seem impossible to view the term “link man” as a neutral one. Two possibilities present themselves: either that 1) “link man” is Helen’s term and the text is further exposing Helen’s naïveté, as it did in the dialogue with Krishnan; or that 2) it is the narrator’s term and the text is demonstrating its own lack of understanding about the impossibility of knowing without dominating. But we are being given, in fact, a much more nuanced model of representation and knowledge. Helen shows that she is quite aware of the manipulation of knowledge for power and mastery, but this does not prevent her from working hard in the interest of communication. I take up the dialogue between Helen and Bashiam in some detail as it is among the best illustrations of the novel’s representation of the different possibilities inherent in (postcolonial) identity formation.

Struggling to study the Adivasis’ language, which was “different in rhythm and structure from any that she knew,” Helen refuses to take the shortcuts of “sign language and a smattering of a few words” for fear that she would become like Rawlings and Mackendrick, whose “thundering hodge-podge of jaos and jaldis [. . . ] bewildered their South Indian labor” (52). The term “South Indian labor,” voiced by Helen, immediately distinguishes her relation to Indian languages from that of the other British characters. Rawlings and Mackendrick know a few words (jao means “go” and jaldi means “quickly”) but these words are Urdu/Hindi words,
widely spoken in northern regions of India but probably incomprehensible to the Tamil workforce. Helen shows that she has no interest in this sort of border-crossing, in gaining a “command of language” that simply serves as the “language of command.” And yet Helen does not read all knowledge of other people and places as appropriation. Genuine communication and knowledge would be possible, Helen insists, if one achieved a higher level of competence in linguistic ability. This idea is not represented by the novel as a manipulative, “Western” model of knowledge, and Bashiam, suitably impressed by Helen, agrees: “one learns if one wishes to learn” (52). Indeed, Helen has high standards for herself, desiring “the minimum fluency without which [. . . ] communication degenerated into grinning goodwill and one-syllabled monotony [. . . ]” (53). We are being shown, on the one hand, that all acts of representation are not necessarily appropriative; on the other, that real communication across class and cultural borders, even if possible, is quite difficult. Expanding identities and consciousness in ways that actually leads to greater understanding requires developing more than the surface points of (linguistic) affiliation.

The Coffer Dams does not rest at this provocative point, but continues to interrogate Helen’s desire to learn about the Adivasis by forcing her to explain to a quizzical Bashiam why “she found interest in a village for whose standards [. . . ] he had little left but a near contempt” (53). Now, the text raises the issue of her romanticization of the Adivasi settlement by presenting her with an estranged member of the hillside who couldn’t wait to leave it behind. Initially, it irks Helen that Bashiam “doted on [machines] as passionately as Clinton” (53). Ever attuned to the nuances of her own discourse, however, Helen realizes that she’s falling into an Orientalist trap: she “expected people like Bashiam—a backward people [sic]—to be content with natural things like hills and woods and a water pump or two [. . . ]” (53). Arriving at one of the most profound insights of Leon Trotsky’s theory of “combined and uneven development,” as it were, Helen sees that the Adivasis, too, were “creatures of the nuclear age however much it had bypassed them” (53).

At this point the narration is still ensconced within Helen’s consciousness as she thinks about Bashiam. But Bashiam then speaks, providing a forceful argument for the validity of Indian modernity and his desire for “upward mobility.” Bashiam insists, challenging Helen, that machines had given him “a better way of life” (54). He understands why Helen pitied the destruction of “the ramshackle, fly-by-night settlement,” a symbol of the way in which modernity forced a transience on the community. But nothing could “dispel the horror that dwelling in [Adivasi huts] infused in
his mind” (54, italics mine). Helen pursues the issue, asking whether it had not been more quiet and peaceful before the blasting began, but Bashiam is not so sure, remembering, with a shiver, “the sodden huts, the cold, the uncertainty, the comfortless ritual of a departure, the incantations of a bewildered clan to an immune god” (55). Bashiam tries to explain to Helen why he loves the machines so much despite the fact that his “roots were attenuated” and he was an outsider everywhere (55). What is important to recognize here is not whether Bashiam “gets it right” in terms of our own political perspectives on “upward mobility” but the fact that the implied author is able to represent, from an imminent perspective, a real debate between characters who are at a remove from the Adivasis whose interests they each claim to represent. Bashiam’s articulation of the different pressures that had driven him way from the settlement—a distaste for poverty and hunger, an unwillingness to pray to an “immune god,” and a love of modern progress—acts as a check on Helen’s desire to know. With Bashiam, she comes to understand that the material experience of being victimized, the experience of actually living in the huts that Helen can only talk about, might drive one toward a rejection of “the indigenous” as a sign for the “nonmodern.” Making Bashiam more than a token figure forces Helen to see that Adivasis, too, were a complex group and had different opinions about their circumstances. Bashiam raises questions about Helen’s complete dismissal of modern development—and thus makes it hard to read the novel as simply voicing a romantic anticapitalist critique.

But it is not only Helen who is forced to shift her perspective. Bashiam’s frequent interactions with her make him discover aspects of his identity that he has suppressed. First, Bashiam realizes that “in his bones, however de-tribalized he might be, birth and upbringing within the tribe had given [him] race knowledge and instincts that could never be acquired by real outsiders” (93). Markandaya’s essentialist language is apparent here, and raises questions about the Adivasi identity that she is projecting. It seems, for instance, that his attempt to “look away” is constructed as more of an act of false consciousness than others’ gestures toward the modern, and one can argue that a romantic antimodernity is operating here. In terms of what the text is attempting to accomplish, however, its assertion that Bashiam’s ethnic identity is an inescapable material fact highlights the difficulties of transforming one’s identity, especially in a modern world that has institutionalized ethnic divisions. Bashiam simply cannot break into a modern Indian subjectivity. Even though he is even more adept at handling machines than his co-workers, they prefer to call him not just a jungly-wallah (“jungle-man”) but, with greater irony, a “civilized jungly-wallah”
Further, Bashiam comes to understand the differences between knowledge based on free association and opportunistic knowledge. Before Bashiam’s interactions with Helen, his experience with non-Adivasi outsiders had included two sorts of people: those “whose outlooks barred them from allowing their interest to be sparked by anything,” and Orientalist scholars “who alarmed him by taking down everything he said for use in the books they were going to write, attaching an importance to every trivial detail” (93–94). Helen came to him, Bashiam reflects, not because of his English, for “her grasp of dialect made her independent of him” (93), but because she identified with his rebelliousness.

The text constructs Bashiam as reflecting explicitly on the commonality between their different paths, on “[t]he divergent channels they had carved for themselves—he the skilled and competent technician away from his jungly-wallah tribe, she the No. 1 memsahib who refused to bear the memsahib’s load—so that there was an acreage of common rebellion which both were stimulated by and respected in one another” (93). What ties Helen and Bashiam together, despite the “divergent channels” of their own choosing, is a refusal to remain within their prescribed identities. Each seeks wholeness, but must rebel in order to find it. Bashiam, whose “roots were attenuated,” longs for the “fusion” and feeling of “one-ness [sic]” that happens at the construction site, bringing together machines and men of different backgrounds (55). The narrator employs the same term, “fusion,” to describe Helen’s experience after sleeping with Bashiam: she feels “a peace that was to do with her mind as consummation had been for her body, the fusion making her whole in a way that she could not recall having achieved before” (160). Indeed, a similar “acreage of common rebellion” is also the political basis for the illicit, cross-class and cross-caste relationship of Ammu, divorced and disgraced, and Velutha, the Dalit carpenter, in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997). Politics saves these elite female characters from what might otherwise be a kind of “slumming.” As Ammu realizes her desire for Velutha, she hopes that “under his careful cloak of cheerfulness he housed a living, breathing anger against the smug, ordered world that she so raged against” (*The God of Small Things* 167). Similarly, it is just after Bashiam’s meditation on their commonalities that he feels “the flame [that] licked over him, over his limbs and mind” (*The Coffer Dams* 95).

A very specific model of identity formation and its complexities, then, lies at the basis of the namak-halaal perspective in *The Coffer Dams*, allowing critique of both a reductive nativism and a blind nation-statism. Helen and Bashiam, first, are marked as characters who are cosmopolitan
and elite, but only in relative and limited ways given their race, gender, ethnicity, and politics. Despite these limits, they employ the skills provided by their cosmopolitan experience to reach out toward new possibilities and the formation of more complex identities. Their two trajectories seem to be in opposite directions: Helen moves toward the Adivasis and develops a critique of modernity and its excesses, while Bashiam seeks to escape this very violence by transforming himself into a “modern” subject and leaving behind his Adivasi identity. However, their interaction with one another over the vast “acreage of common rebellion” helps to refine their knowledge about modernity’s violence. It is at this point, in the narrative sequence, that Helen and Bashiam are punished for their transgressions, as if modernity exacts revenge for exposing its processes. Helen’s cultural explorations are tolerated until she actually stands up against Clinton’s plans to halt the effort to recover the bodies of the dead Adivasi workers. The narrator depicts Clinton’s rape of his wife as a deliberately political act. He literally chants the phrase “not our people” throughout the scene—the words he used earlier to warn her against associating with the Adivasis—as if to make her aware that she is being punished for her transgression of national, racial, and class borders. Similarly, though abused and resented, Bashiam is tolerated for his technical skills only to be cast aside like a broken machine when he confronts the juggernaut of “progress” by trying to move aside the mighty boulder. There is no reconciliation between Helen and Clinton and no quick recovery for Bashiam.

With Helen and Bashiam, then, The Coffer Dams offers careful, contextualized representations of identity: transformations are possible, but one cannot imagine oneself, on the individual level, across subject positions overdetermined by society. Elites who are uncritical of their role in oppressing Adivasis or who actively maintain the unequal relations of power are depicted, in contrast, as putting their intercultural knowledge to poor uses. However, they are also contextualized carefully. For instance, Rawlings—he of the jaos and jaldis—has lived in many lands and climates but his “cosmopolitan reflections” are limited to thinking about “the women whose shining skins had gone from copper to ebony” as he exerted his “double mastery” over them as a man and as a landlord in Asia and Africa during colonial times (222). Rawlings is given a voice, but his sexism and colonial mentality render him as unsympathetic. In this context, the novel does not hesitate to point out that decolonization, for all its limitations, actually placed a limit on such a man’s barbaric trysts. Rawlings bemoans the fact that things were no longer the same now: “the spirit is different [after] the freedom which [ . . . ] had been delivered on a plate [and] ma[de]
people uppity” (222). We are encouraged to read against the grain of Rawlings’s words and to champion the fact that independence, having tapped into the “common sense” of ordinary Indians, made them sufficiently “uppity” to refute the advances of the Rawlingses that people’d the world. The implied author, thus, encourages us to investigate the complex identities produced in postcolonial contexts and their fluidity, but within an explicit political framework. The violence of postcolonial modernity ought to be criticized, but decolonization represented a step toward freedom.

The Coffer Ribs

The resolution of the conflicts in The Coffer Dams presents us with a few problems on the level of narrative and representation of the nation, not unlike the ending of A Time to Be Happy. The pressures of nation-statism, as it were, produce in the text an inability to sustain its critique of modern India. By this time, Clinton has refused all alternatives and spoken the words of doom—they will not break the coffer dams though this will mean the submergence of the Adivasi village. As the headman lies dying, symbolizing the utter victimization of the village as it awaits the flooding, Helen defies the driving rainstorm to march up the thundering hills and show her solidarity with the Adivasis, accompanied by a newly rebellious Mackendrick. Bashiam is nowhere in these final scenes, as he has already said his farewells to Helen a few chapters ago; she will go back to England, and Bashiam, when he gets well, will look for more building projects in postcolonial India. While Helen sits quietly with the headman, having learned from Bashiam how to be tranquil in the face of crisis, Mackendrick paces back and forth impatiently, waiting for a word from the Adivasi leader regarding the future of the village. Shaking the headman awake from his semiconscious stupor, an act that is marked as one of Western impatience, Mackendrick lifts up his frail frame so that he can see the distant mountains and judge, from his experience, the state of the storm. The exertion ends up killing the Adivasi leader, but his final prediction—that the rains will end when the faraway ridges are clear—provides great joy. By the next dawn, Helen, “having kept her vision whole” and in tune with the Adivasis, can also see that the rain has stopped at the distant ridge and that the monsoon will soon be over (255).

Amidst the general euphoria after the end of the heavy rains, Mackendrick “enclose[es] [Helen’s] hand in two jubilant palms” (256). The novel concludes:
They picked their way out, into the watery landscape and through the aftermath of the storm to the river to look, and saw that the banks held firm and the water levels were falling, which was of moment to them. While others who looked, their concerns being different, saw only the coffers, whose formidable ribs rose bleached and clean in the washed air above the turbulent river. (256)

This potential scene of tranquility and hope—binding together Helen and Mackendrick with the pronoun “they”—emerges quite unexpectedly in a novel whose main themes had been the rejection of modernity and the utter alienation of Helen from the other British characters. The passage evokes the mythical scenes, common in many religious traditions, of the human survivors of a devastating flood, of new beginnings that proceed slowly, “pick[ing] their way out” of the “watery landscape.” Indeed, there is a humanist, Miltonian resonance here, recalling Adam and Eve holding hands and looking out toward a world that they must create anew after being exiled from Eden at the end of *Paradise Lost*. As in Milton, there is a spirit of adventure, excitement, and hope in Helen and Mackendrick’s departure from the village, a celebration of humanity in the midst of crisis. But what do we make of this diffusion of the opposition between modernity and the Adivasis? Or this newfound association of Helen with Mackendrick, who remains a partner in Clinton and Mackendrick, Ltd., now associated directly with rape and homicide?

There is much evidence to suggest that after its incessant critique of the brutality of modernity, the text is finally compromising with it, recognizing the limits of the Adivasis’ position and keeping faith in the possibilities of a gentler, kinder modernity. Mackendrick’s shift toward Helen, in this view, would symbolize the hope that modernity could be reformed, piece by piece, by the interventions of sympathetic elites. Indeed, despite all of the attempts of Helen and Bashiam, the Adivasis lose their agency; they are not represented as actually doing anything to force Clinton’s hand. When Clinton coldly lays down the rigid laws of bourgeois rule—“We make the calculations, it is they who run the risk” (250)—the Adivasis and their allies are reduced to waiting for the weather to change. Indeed, even after having his teeth kicked in by postcolonial modernity, Bashiam resigns himself to his work after Helen says she will leave the village: “I shall go, too. There are many projects [. . .] It is a big country” (235). The rebelliousness that had shaken up the steady march of development seems resolved too quickly, with Helen returning to a British friend and Bashiam being trapped, once again, in the service of the modern nation. One of
the effects of the ending is to make modernity appear so threatening and unchanging that it can serve to undermine the radical critique made by the book and rid the oppressed of any agency. The coffer dams become an organic and permanent feature of the geography, as it were, as they are described as having “formidable ribs [that] rose bleached and clean” from the river.

The disappearance of Bashiam toward the end of the novel, the incessant critique of Krishnan’s attempts to organize labor as opportunistic, the reliance on British agents such as Helen and Mackendrick—all of these elements in the plot and characterization undermine the crucial element that differentiated it from *A Time to Be Happy,* namely the construction of the oppressed as active subjects who think, question, and resist. In Sahgal’s novel, the problem is persistent: the text condemns poverty but has no characters that are poor; it proclaims the greatness of “the *kisan*’s art” but develops no *kisan* voices. In the process, the tendency to compromise with loyalists and imperialists is the only option, as these elites are seen as the only avenue for change. In Markandaya, the presence of Bashiam, the impact of the headman on Helen, and Helen’s own critique of Bashiam allow a much more complex picture of Adivasi politics and, crucially, allow the development of agency while guarding against romanticization. But all of this is dropped, as it were, by an ending that neither imagines Adivasi resistance and agency nor remains fully critical of the dam project—the symbol of nationalist and imperialist teamwork in the postcolonial era. It is possible, in fact, to read this gesture as a final return to the nation-state, as depicted at the end of Sahgal’s novel, even while insisting that the marginalized and oppressed ought not to be forgotten.

However, the one element that might allow for a different reading of this ending is the possibility that the text’s return to modernity and the nation emerges from such a stark realism—eschewing all easy utopias—that nothing is possible besides irony and the hope of ongoing confrontation and resistance. The novel rarely turns to the ironic mode but there is certainly a trace here, as there is in Sahgal’s topography of the Village Industries Week, of what Theodor Adorno calls “negative dialectics,” a mode in which critically drawing out contradictions until their logical conclusion leads to a radical, if pessimistic and even nihilistic, critique of the status quo. At Helen and Bashiam’s final meeting, for instance, Helen asks why Bashiam tried to move the boulder after all. Says Bashiam: “There are some things which one has to do” (234)—a phrase that Helen repeats to Mackendrick in order to try to explain why she goes up to the village, which meant risking death since Clinton had refused to break the dams
and release the rapidly rising river. In each case, the speaker is conscious of the fact that the phrase does not explain his or her actions in logical terms, but is content with its pure expression of resistance and willpower. Bashiam and Helen are simply silent after articulating this, as “each understood the other had gone as far as it was possible to go, for the present or perhaps even forever, and were quiet” (234). It is a silence that lies at the end of a dialogue in which a deep communication has been reached, and which gives strength for bearing the brunt of modernity’s future attacks—a silence whose power Helen learns only gradually.

Rereading the final paragraph of the novel from this point of view, The Coffer Dams offers no triumphant tale—celebrating neither modernity nor effective resistance—but a representation of the impasse between the oppressors and the oppressed in postcolonial conditions. The end of the rains symbolically conjoins two events that were originally opposed to one another; the threat to the Adivasis ends, but the dam project continues forward. Helen and Mackendrick are joyous about the former as they see that “the banks held firm and the water levels were falling” (256). But there is no question that this is only a small victory because the “others who looked,” with different eyes and much more power in the world, “saw only the coffers.” Through such eyes, that rendered human beings invisible, dams were like live creatures (with ribs) and represented only reality. The ongoing presence of the coffer dams might now be read as containing a threat as dire as Sahgal’s looming smokestacks. The main difference is that while modernity in A Time to Be Happy completely encircles the space of the indigenous, The Coffer Dams reveals that modernity can be looked at from two different perspectives, a subaltern-centered one whose main interest is halting its destructive path, and a nation-statist and/or imperialist one in which development itself signifies progress.