Resisting Modernity
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Counternarratives of Nation and Masculinity
in pre-Independence India

By

Samir Dayal

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS PUBLISHING
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This book first published 2007 by
Cambridge Scholars Publishing
15 Angerton Gardens, Newcastle, NE5 2JA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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I thank many who have helped me complete this project, at various stages and in small and large ways, and sometimes without knowing it. Writing a book is mostly a solitary task, but among those whose conversations or comments have contributed directly or indirectly are Homi Bhabha, Jonathan Boyarin John Brenkman, Judith Gurewich, R. Radhakrishnan, Frances Restuccia, Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, Rajini Srikanth and Cyrus Veeser. I gratefully acknowledge research grants from Franklin College and Bentley College. Sheila Ekman, Mariana Fallon, Lindsey Carpenter, Marcia McCoy, Amy Galante, Donna Gouldson, and Barbara Rayburg provided invaluable assistance in locating research materials. My parents, Vineeta and Purshotam Dayal provided knowledgeable advice as well as confidence and love. To my family, Deven, Mira and Laura, I owe a gratitude beyond what this acknowledgement can convey.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The tradition of all the dead generations weigh like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionising themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battlecries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language.


It was a psychologically reflexive and to some extent not fully reflected impulse that Marx identified, in the opening of *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, as constituting a symbolic resistance to the revolutionary moment. When individuals are confronted with a paradigm shift, such as the advent of a new social order, they paradoxically balk, and turn to a comforting and familiar *Spiritus Mundi*, or storehouse of cultural images and symbols. Yet this backward turn is not to be dismissed as a merely retrograde or reactionary moment, for it also indexes the impulse to preserve strands of culture that would otherwise be assimilated into a dominant ideology in the service of the new. Just such a moment of newness faced the citizens of India (who were not universally sure what it meant now to be Indian) at the turn of the nineteenth century, as their country was on the cusp of Independence from the British.

Many political leaders, such as Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Jinnah, rose to prominence as representatives of the emergent South Asian nations. Yet before the victory of the dominant versions of nationalism was fully achieved, there was an internal struggle among competing versions for state power, as Gyan Prakash points out (201). If India had a national identity, it was to be determined at the level of the independent nation-state as the political representation of “the people.” Indian nationalism’s anticolonial energy was expressed as the project of defining an Indian modernity, not just one derivative from the modular Western form as proposed by Benedict Anderson in his influential *Imagined*
Communities. Critiquing what he sees as Anderson’s too-narrow perspective, Partha Chatterjee argues that it was crucial for India to “establish a sovereign nation-state”—because social justice could only be achieved if a system of institutions were in place that could underwrite guarantees by and claims on the nation-state. Nehru understood this, and it was because it was anchored in this understanding that his modernist vision of a secular, independent Indian state ultimately trumped Gandhi’s vision and succeeded on the intranational as well as on the international stage. For Chatterjee, the nation always already had an “inner sphere”—a core of spiritual or cultural identity—that was the irreducible evidence of a preexisting sovereignty. It is here that Prakash diverges from Chatterjee’s position, pointing out that the imperative to “imagine differently” applied to the institutional structure of the nation-state, and not just to the nation (202). It is this imagining differently, at the political as well as at the cultural levels, that I take as a fundamental premise, but I extend it to mean not only imagining differently from the presumptively modular Western forms but from the hegemonic “native” forms within the body of the nation. After all, the postcolonial nation state by nature seeks to legitimize a hegemonic national identity to the exclusion of others (Appadurai 156).

Colonial and postcolonial historiography remain partial if they account for only the dominant narratives and visions, or narrate only the transition from the hegemonic ideology of the British rulers to the equally hegemonic ideology promulgated by the native inheritors of political power, leaving out the marginal, alternative, or subaltern narratives. The important contribution of the Subaltern Studies collective has retrieved many subaltern narratives. This book attempts an analogous but distinct act of recuperation, focusing on India during the phase of transition to Independence and immediately after Independence, highlighting not technically “subaltern” narratives but nonetheless marginalized alternative visions of the emerging nation. I argue that there is compelling reason to consider these marginalized visions as significant, as they offer important models of resistance to, or divergence from, the dominant narratives of nation as well as resistance to colonial modes of knowledge.

This introduction provides the historical and cultural context for my analysis of the contributions of three important but marginalized authors of counternarratives of modernity: Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836-88), Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) and Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948). While Gandhi was acknowledged to be a major force in the eventual removal of the British from India through his non-violent resistance, the ideas of Ramakrishna and Tagore have sometimes been neglected or not
recognized as being adequately “resistant” even in the annals of postcolonial studies, which is acknowledged to be “a discipline that has produced a new archive of revisionist colonial materials, forcing Western readers to re-negotiate their relationship to the history of colonialism—and to re-examine the continuities and discontinuities between the colonial and postcolonial eras” (Singh 5). Even Gandhi’s star has dimmed over the half-century since Independence. Yet in the context of 19th- and early 20th century colonial India, the three figures were proponents of what can be called marginal, eccentric or dissident “forms” of social arrangement, in the sense that Claude Lefort imagines such forms: as modes of articulation of social relations and institutions.

If I emphasize the eccentricity of these figures it is because they were exemplary representations—with a difference— of a pattern noted by Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal: it was “during this period,” they observe, “that the idioms, and even the irascible idiosyncrasies, of communitarian identities and national ideologies were sought to be given a semblance of coherence and structure. What needs emphasizing is that there were multiple and competing narratives informed by religious and linguistic cultural identities seeking to contribute to the emerging discourse on the Indian nation” (107-8; emphasis added). Criticizing even such eminent postcolonialist historians as Partha Chatterjee for a “difference-seeking distortion” that privileges “a particular strand of ‘our’ modernity as the tradition of social historical thinking on modernism and nationalism,” the authors usefully remind us that a “sharply defined fault-line between tradition and modernity as well as Indian and European modernity makes it impossible to take full account of the contestations that animated the creative efforts to fashion a vibrant culture and politics of anti-colonial modernity” (112). Indeed it might even be said that “eccentricity,” in the case of someone like Ramakrishna, was a proud achievement, and a metonymy for a resistant self-determination. Ramakrishna, Tagore and Gandhi certainly wore their eccentricities like badges of honor, a token of an alternative if minoritized vision of what it meant to be Indian.

It is important to attend to these eccentric narratives, by definition less significant than those that established themselves in the context of the struggle for Independence and afterwards in the effort to establish a democratic polity in India, precisely because they embody the diversity, the skein of multiple and competing narratives. They point to what in a Foucauldian perspective ought to be recognized as examples of the “‘insurrection of subjugated knowledges’, independent of the approval of established regimes of thought” (Stoler 63). It is these subjugated knowledges that permit us to unmask the presumptive naturalness of
sovereignty assumed even today in India by extremist Hindu nationalism, for instance, which has demonstrated the viciousness of the biopolitics of power that names and then excludes marginal groups as intruders in the body politic. By the same token subjugated knowledges carry forward latent possibilities promising a more capacious and liberal democracy. Indeed it is these marginalized narratives that urge us to a reappraise the meaning of democracy itself. In other words, these preserved but unrealized potentialities exert an ethical demand on us even in their silence and marginalization, indeed by virtue of their silencing as minor narratives and because they accrue political potency as representing the disenfranchised. To reanimate these potentialities would require an attention to the political and symbolic diversity of social life emphasized by Lefort as a counter to a totalizing vision of the polity.

The contest of potentialities against the actually existing forms of political and social arrangements is, as Lefort suggests, enabled precisely by the very conception of popular sovereignty as articulated to the conception of a lieu vide: nobody, especially no sovereign, can occupy that empty place of power. Being empty, that lieu vide solicits “other” visions of society, and so this emptiness carries within it the potential to proliferate difference and minor narratives. But by the same token it is also true that power tries to colonize that empty space in a unitary imagining of sovereignty. Emptiness, whether figured as a “lieu vide” in Lefort’s terms or an “empty time” in Walter Benjamin’s, thus has a double edge. Yet even the magisterial and influential understanding of nationalism offered by Benedict Anderson tends to neglect the plurality of minor visions when it focuses on the continuity of cultural systems into a unifying and unitary nationalism— “the [imagined] nation” inhabiting the present in an Auerbachian and especially Benjaminian conception of “homogenous, empty time” (Imagined Communities 12, 22, 24-25, 30, 37, 44). For alternative nationalisms flourished during the struggle for Indian Independence side-by-side with the national narrative that emerged as the dominant or representative imagined community of India. When postcolonial criticism recycles the orthodox monocular views of that struggle, it exacerbates the problem.

That “discourses of nationalism” ought to be conceived, and studied, in the plural and not the singular is a point endorsed by Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, who note that it is not only the “meanings and memories” of the partition of the country at the moment of Independence that are divergent, but the interpretations of Indian nationalism itself. They refer to Chatterjee’s argument that Jawaharlal Nehru’s vision of modern postcolonial India became a “‘discourse of order’ conducted not only in ‘a
single, consistent, unambiguous voice’ but also ‘glossing over all earlier contradictions, divergences and differences’” to point out that this account of the Nehruvian model of India also “leaves insufficient space for the recovery of contested visions of nationhood and alternative frameworks of the free Indian state” (195). This book looks at a few such alternative frameworks.

A premise of my own analysis is that the eccentric visions of subjectivity and society offered by Ramakrishna, Tagore and Gandhi remind us of other struggles, whether it be the struggles of women, gay, lesbian and transgendered people and other oppressed or marginalized groups. My method in each of the main chapters is to consider one of the three male figures I am taking as both prominent and marginalized, although the larger skein of subjugated knowledges of less prominent minor perspectives should also be visible just under the “skin” of the main analysis. In other words, my concentration on the three marginal discourses of the three male figures I discuss at length is both motivated by a desire to put into relief the complex gendered dimensions of their resistance to the dominant male narrative of nationalism and consciously intended to point to other resistant narratives. The focus on three male figures is in no way intended to occlude yet other visions or to limit the horizon of what it meant to be an Indian as India came into its own, and in the final chapter I take up the struggle of a subaltern women’s group to make just this point.

We cannot forget that there were and are many “Indias”—and exponentially many more “Indians.” Among those who sought to put forward their vision of Indianess during the struggle toward Independence there were revivalists such as Lala Lajpat Rai. But there were also reformists such as Ranade, in league with whom one could put the different examples of Rabindranath Tagore the mystical rationalist, and Swami Vivekananda, star pupil of Ramakrishna who brought together religion and reason in a vision of India that also fell outside the dominant discourse of nationalism—particularly that of the Congress Party—that gained the limelight. This volume highlights such complex “difference” even among the discrepant narratives of national identity cast into shadow as India lurched into modernity. It was not just a bipolar contest between a forward-looking modernity and backward-looking/traditional or mystical/religious worldviews to be decided de jure in favor of modernity.

Indeed it was the gradual rise to prominence of the discourse of modernity that encouraged the emergence of eccentric visions of Indianess. The more modernity deprecated or banished religious,
traditionalist, non-rationalist and other socially ec-static ideologies and practices, the more adherents to such ideologies and practices felt excluded, and the more vigorously they sought agency through resistant micronarratives, and it is three particularly significant instances of such eccentric or marginalized resistances that I discuss. They represented not just odd or obsolescent views of the world and of the future of the nation but offered representative representations of social identities, ways of being in the world that spoke to and for entire constituencies who felt left out from the dominant, elite, vision that triumphed.

Historical discourse, as Michel de Certeau reminds us, has a temporal dimension. It "makes a social identity explicit, not so much in the way it is 'given' or held as stable, as in the ways it is differentiated from a former period or another society" (The Writing of History 45; emphases original). But it is also the case that dominant discourses normalize particular social identities at the expense of others, and that there is a locational or spatial dimension to this normalization of one discourse to the disadvantage of others. De Certeau proceeds to observe that "however general or extensive it may be, no thought or reading is capable of effacing the specificity of the place, the origin of my speech, or the area in which I am researching" (56).

Whether examining the precious and precocious "idiotism" of Ramakrishna's "ecstatic" performative, Tagore's self-consciously unfashionable project of "love" as politics or Gandhi's often recalcitrant politics of pacifism, I emphasize the specificity of cultural location and social positioning. This is then an archaeology of marginalized narratives, unearthing their residual traces to reconstitute a social and political loss—the loss of a possible future vision for India. For with de Certeau I seek to preserve the model of a "federation of self-managed" communities or subjectivities (Heterologies 230), to preserve the richness and promise latent in the federation of differentiated narratives of the nation. This is a model by definition of a loss of equality and fraternity, invoking an unrealized utopian space where all voices might have been equally valued in (a sometimes admittedly agonistic) national community, where the country's future would not have been cast ab initio as a predictable, fixed, and totalized universe and the precise character of India's modernity does not seem at the outset a settled matter. What else India might have been from what it has become is not an idle question, and these figures remind us to ask.

It may seem odd, even perverse, to characterize as "marginal" or eccentric a leader of Gandhi's stature (leaving aside Ramakrishna and Tagore, who did not enjoy quite the same international reputation). But in
Introduction

this judgment I am by no means alone: Gyan Prakash, for instance, concurs with this representation (215, 224-226). Beginning around 1920 all the way through 1948, Gandhi was the preeminent symbolic presence in the Indian National Congress, and the universally undisputed moral figurehead of resistance to domination, especially after his inauguration of nationwide nonviolent non-cooperation following the Jallianwallah Bagh massacre. His near-sainthood identification with the dispossessed was an ethical example unmatched by any other leader. Nonetheless, it was not his vision of Independent India that won the day but the vision of what Chatterjee terms “standard nationalist history.” Gandhi was assassinated by a Hindu fanatic a few months after Independence, but even before his death Gandhi was deeply disappointed by the history of Partition; he felt his dream of India had been shattered. I read this loss as underscoring or repeating the vanquishing of his politico-philosophical vision.

As I show in my chapter on Gandhi, while this venerable moral leader championed a utopic vision of India as Ram Rajya, the rule of Rama (the godlike hero of the Ramayana), this utopia registered with many as eccentric backward-looking—out of step with modernity and out of sync with the (Hindu) nationalism of the moment of Partition. Gandhi’s manifesto-like Hind Swaraj, which would have seemed “obscurantist” to the indigenous elites (Bose & Jalal 136), projected Ram Rajya as a state of moralized—yet ironically still patriarchal—anarchy in which each subject would have rule over his or her own self (swaraj), dispensing with the need for political leaders and hierarchy, and this self-rule would be the model for Swaraj with a capital S, as it were (political Independence). Such idealized anarchism had little to offer by way of a political program for India’s post-Independence future. Nehru broke with Gandhi when Congress split down the line on the issue of the non-cooperation movement (1920-22), and he saw Gandhi’s salt march as perhaps the most “eccentric” of all his initiatives (149). Gandhi’s vision of self-sufficient village reconstruction fared no better in post-Independence history than that overarching vision of Ram Rajya. His unrealistically doctrinaire—and again in this regard eccentric—projection of Swaraj was ultimately quite eclipsed by the Nehruvian Realpolitik, which was centered on a modernizing (secular socialist) agenda. In the end Gandhi’s individual satyagraha campaign was reduced to a “facesaving” device (Bose & Jalal 155), and he was left to mourn quietly in the throes of Partition soon after Independence, his dream of a unified India in shreds, until he was assassinated within a few months of Partition.

Nehru’s self-confessed “obsession” with the “thought of India” as a modern entity may have been as much a response to colonialism as
Gandhi’s vision by contrast was of a national “family,” a vision ironically rendered doubly problematic because it seemed a throwback in contrast with the Nehruvian idea of India and at the same time seemed more aligned with the communal form identified by Marx as an “Asiatic mode of production.” This phrase of Marx’s Gayatri Spivak labels “notorious” because, as propagated even in the work of contemporary luminaries of the Western academy such as Fredric Jameson, it perpetuates the invidious opposition of non-Western “modes” against presumptively modular Eurocentric narratives of modernity (Critique 71-73). But as Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst noted a quarter century before Spivak, the idea of an Asiatic mode of production had already acquired the reputation of being “the most controversial and contested of all the possible modes of production outlined in the works of Marx and Engels” (178). Hindess and Hirst emphasize that there is an ideological edge in Marx’s description, “consigning” the Asiatic mode to a region “different in essence from the West” (179, 180).

Nehru’s vision of Indian modernity embodied the dominant nationalist response to colonialism, but simultaneously reinscribed the Western discursive privileging of the process of “moderniz[ing] the customs and institutions of a traditional society” (Chatterjee, Nation and its Fragments 5). Defining modernity as a “seductively wrapped and internally inconsistent mixture of instrumental rationality, utilitarianism, and respect for individual autonomy and choice” (5), Sunil Khilnani observes that among the reasons Gandhi’s vision was marginalized as a political discourse was that he declined to produce a narrative of the nation recognizable within the wider discursive regime of rationality, utilitarianism and individualism. As Khilnani notes, Gandhi “refused to separate religion from politics, as modernists and secularists insisted, and strove to refute the colonial charge that religion must ultimately keep India divided. Equally, however, he recoiled from the vision of nationalist Hindus.” For where they had recourse to a narrative of the Hindu nation as having been “oppressed, terrorized and victimized both by the colonial present and by past Muslim rule, and promised a remedy in a martial patriotism, a khaki-shorted veneration of the Fatherland, Gandhi deftly inverted this image: he resurrected an older model of feminized patriotism (which men like [V.D.] Savarkar had sought to correct by infusing Indian patriotism with virility) and made his life and body, his habits and posture, a demonstration of the message that strength was with the victims of history” (164).
Although I focus here on Ramakrishna, Tagore and Gandhi, there were others in the pantheon of resistance to colonialism, not all of them as reprehensible as Savarkar—the author of *The Indian War of Independence 1857* who preached a blend of high-toned Goddess-worship and militant nationalism (Hans 191)—and not all of whom received due recognition. For instance, there was the Rani of Jhansi, whose kingdom was taken by Dalhousie in 1853 and who mounted a fierce resistance until she was killed on horseback. There was Nana Sahib who delivered a blow to the British in Kanpur. There was Raja Rammohun Roy, “the father of the Indian Renaissance” and a leader in the fight to abolish *sati*; later, there were intellectual leaders such as Lala Lajpat Rai in Punjab, Bal Gangadhar Tilak in Maharashtra and Bipin Chandra Pal in Bengal—the trinity of Lal, Bal and Pal who agitated, with Gopal Krishna Gokhale and Aurobindo Ghose, against Lord Curzon’s partition of Bengal in 1905. There was Vallabhbhai Patel, like Gandhi a Gujarati and a London-trained barrister and powerful presence in Indian politics. There was the more difficult case of Subhas Chandra Bose, the Bengali lawyer who turned to Mussolini, Ataturk and Hitler during his sojourn in Europe in the mid-1930s for examples of militant resistance, and even formed his own army to fight colonialism. Neither can we forget the agrarian protests, most famously that of the millenarian group led by Birsa Munda uprising of 1895-1900 or the Chauri Chaura incident in which, contravening Gandhi’s program of non-violent protest, peasants burned down a police station in U.P. Nor should we ignore the fact that in the late 1700s and throughout the 1800s tribal or *adivasi* groups offered resistance against “the oppression and exploitation of the ‘diku’ migrants [land-holding or *zamindar* elites] and the British” and later resistance to national elites as part of the Jharkhand movement in West Bengal, which went so far as to project a “sub-nationality” in its late phase (Ghosh 121, 127). Even postcolonial critics have not always succeeded in giving full recognition to all of these various instances of resistance. One of the premises of my argument is that “resistance” during and after the passing of the colonial phase often had a double valence. On the one hand resistance had to be mounted against British colonial policy. On the other, dominant anticolonial narratives, precisely because they tended to aspire to hegemonic status themselves, spurred an internal resistance or immanent critique.

India was experiencing a profound social, political and legislative transformation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1845, for instance, the Lex Loci Act (tellingly called the “Emancipation Act” by the British) was published and, in 1850, enacted as the Caste
Disabilities Removal Act. The express aim of the act was to protect converts to Christianity from Hinduism or Islam: such converts were rendered outcaste (mlechha) by the source Hindu or Muslim communities to which they had, until conversion, belonged. In the process of this outcasting, they were simultaneously divested of rights to ancestral property. So the British Act sought to guarantee some protection to converts by legislating that the converts could still be considered Hindus or Muslims “for purposes of law”—but in this the British unwittingly sowed the seeds for hardening what was formerly a mixed society into a polity divided rigidly between Hindus and others who were by implication imperfect citizens of the Indian nation-state (Viswanathan, “Coping” 184). This resulted in a profound social and political change, which would pay terrible dividends as Independence became a reality. And we hardly need to be reminded that today, after half a century of Independence, the country is still paying the price for this wrenching division.

Similarly, the 1880s and the 1890s witnessed the passage of the Ilbert Bill, the burgeoning of the native volunteer movement, the institution of the Public Service Commission, and the controversy around the Age of Consent bill. In the near-century spanning the Indian Revolt or “Mutiny” of 1857 and the departure of the British in 1947 the nationalist movement grew from a fringe radicalism to a dominant discourse, although even before the Revolt, “[n]either military mutiny nor civil revolt was uncommon in early colonial India.”

Many of the epochal changes in society were concerned generally with defining Indian identity, and particularly with defining sexual identity—inextricably linked (and this link is glossed as absolutely fundamental by Michel Foucault) to power. To fully apprehend the momentousness of these changes, Ann Laura Stoler reminds us, it is necessary to recognize that “Europe’s eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discourses on sexuality, like other cultural, political, or economic assertions, cannot be charted in Europe alone” and that “racial obsessions and refractions of imperial discourses on sexuality have not been restricted to bourgeois culture in the colonies alone” (7). Transformations in the Indian political and social context were synthetically bound to the sexualized discourse of empire emerging from the metropolitan center. But even when these principles are kept before us, it is also always a matter of perspective. When one looks from the West at the Indian context, one gets a slightly different picture than when one looks from the perspective of the Indians themselves. It is the latter perspective that concerns me primarily.
From the viewpoint of Indian male subjects of empire, anticolonial activism in the period leading up to and immediately after India’s Independence was fundamentally a definitional struggle concerning Indian masculinity, and inextricably imbricated with constructions of British masculinity. Sinha argues that “the emerging dynamics between colonial and nationalist politics in the 1880s and 1890s in India is best captured in the logic of colonial masculinity” (1). And there could be few more pellucid illustrations of this aspect of anticolonial struggle than the Ilbert Bill. The Bill was on the face of it a matter of legal principle, which was to allow Indian judges to try European British subjects. But it evolved naturally into a broader contest between men on either side of the racial divide. The Anglo-Indians mobilized to demonstrate the “constitutional timidity of the race” that made the natives unfit to sit in judgment over the “manly Englishman” (Sinha 41). And many of those resisting the colonialis
discourse of empire, whether elite-nationalist or marginalized figures, expended prodigious amount of their energy on shoring up the image of Indian masculine identity. This provides important context for my discussion in Chapter 1, where I consider Ramakrishna Paramahansa’s provocative—and frankly, odd—performative of masculinity. Fundamental to my argument there is that although he can be situated in the then already established Northern Indian tradition of bhakti (“devotion”), Ramakrishna’s specific cultural interventions cannot be understood without an appreciation of his eccentric and fraught relationship to modernity and the resistance to both it and the colonial presence, modernity’s self-appointed representative in the benighted non-West. Indeed, I argue that Ramakrishna offered his own cultural self-construction as a model of a resistant and alternative modernity.

To grasp why Ramakrishna’s performative is not merely a negligible eccentricity but politically and socially significant we have to understand first of all that even some domestic (British) political and social issues were being played out—and “performed,” if not resolved—in sociopolitical experiments far away in the colonies. This remote performance of domestic (British) debates in the colonies follows the logic of “return effect” [effet de retour] glossed by Foucault: “colonization . . . transported European models to other continents, but . . . this same colonization had a return effect on the mechanisms of power in the Occident, on the institutional apparatuses and techniques of power.” A key feature of the British narrative of power and self-fashioning was the denigration of the Bengali babu as an inferior foil. Indian masculinity was represented as other: degraded, effeminate, ineffectual as well as
affectedly intellectual, sensual as well as disorganized in the very pursuit of pleasure—in order to consolidate British manhood as secure and superior.

As a gender-bending religious ecstatic and a Brahmin social reformer, Ramakrishna spoke to a select cohort of contemporary Brahmin men, who were privileged by caste but in actuality enjoyed little social advantage on that account and moreover felt passed over by “modernity.” Besides, there had emerged a backlash to Brahmin domination of society, as exemplified by Jyotirao Phule’s lower-caste movement, inaugurated in Maharashtra in 1873, called the Satyashodak Samaj, or Society for Truth. And, because the caste system had customarily excluded them, there were also Muslim groups seeking to reaffirm their identities in the latter part of the 19th century (Bose & Jalal 109). In other words, Brahmins, including those to whom and for whom Ramakrishna spoke, felt both entitled to privilege within the caste-laden internal milieu and embattled as members of a socioeconomic class. Brahmins, “combining in their lifestyles the archaic and the modern,” were “symptomatic” of India’s “incomplete modernity” (Natarajan, 156; Chakrabarty 20).

Ramakrishna was not entirely ignorant of modern Western thought, and indeed prided himself on knowing what he ultimately rejected. He and his acolytes, among whom his favorite was the young man who would become Swami Vivekananda, were increasingly frustrated because in the changing society which they inhabited, their nominal or expected privileges did not materialize, and they found it increasingly difficult to make a living. For them, society—understood as the interpenetration of the political, the economic, the sexual, the religious and the ideological—was in the process of unraveling even as it exacerbated the impact of the economic on the political or on the religious or ideological. Many of Ramakrishna’s disciples would have been seen by the British as exemplifying the stereotypes of the effete, semi-educated domestic elite, as Bengali babus. Ramakrishna offered them a haven in his ashram, as well a discipleship in a psychically complicated form of “Mother”-worship. But he also offered them a way to recuperate their pride as Indian men and citizens, and in that regard it was a political intervention by way of a refusal of dominant nationalist narratives and a recoil from secular modernity.

In the second chapter, I examine another dissident narrative implicitly critiquing the narrative of the nation. Tagore’s critique of nationalism emerged from a quite different (narrow, reformist Brahmo Samaj) milieu
but an equally marginal structural position, given the historical context. This chapter highlights three crucial aspects of his philosophical, political and ethical project (leaving aside some of his more poetical and literary themes). The first is Tagore’s antinationalism, though he believed in a proper cultural pride as alternative to chauvinistic nationalism. The second aspect is his desire to reposition India within the regional geopolitical space of Asia: to promote the idea of India having a special, international moral mission and the idea of pan-Asian solidarity. Tagore proposed that the East, and India in particular, could be a spiritually potent fulcrum (and model) mediating between Western Enlightenment models of modernity and Eastern ideas of what it meant to be enlightened and in so doing to develop a modern identity into the future. The third aspect is Tagore’s desire to refashion an erotic economy of “love,” conceptualized first of all in a culturally specific idiom but beyond that in a universal humanist allegory of community. This erotic economy, as I demonstrate, is to be contrasted with the erotic symbology of affect that was woven through Ramakrishna’s access to the traditional forms of darsan. The erotic dimensions of Tagore’s thought were not constrained within the sphere of emotion but were complicated by ambiguous refractions of gender and by subtle inversions of the received genderings of categories of home and world, or private and public. If, as Dipesh Chakrabarty put it in Provincializing Europe literary modernism is understood (n Marshall Berman’s terms) as “designating the aesthetic means by which an urban and literate class subject to the invasive forces of modernization seeks to create, however faltering, a sense of being at home in the modern city” (155-6), then Tagore perhaps was rightly criticized as being unable to do for Calcutta “what Baudelaire had done for nineteenth-century Paris” and his writings justifiably derided for an imagination lacking in “realism.” Yet, as Chakrabarty goes on to observe, Tagore insists on the relative inferiority of a programmatically realist, materialist agenda and promotes an aesthetic drawing on both Western Romantic (Keatsian) poetics and the home-grown poetics developed in the Upanishads and Sanskrit aesthetic theory (167). In Tagore’s work the three aspects noted above are, of course inter-connected themes and I develop their interlinkages.

Tagore’s vision, though deeply flawed and unable to escape its sentimental unworldliness, might today still claim to be instructive for the contemporary discourse of “regional modernities” (Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal) or “alternative modernities” (Gaonkar). Of course, this is not to forget the larger issue, pithily framed by Fredric Jameson, that the trend in contemporary cultural studies to promote alternative modernities “overlook[s] the meaning of modernity which is that of a worldwide
capitalism itself” (qtd. Žižek 295). Tagore’s insistence on love was intended precisely to deconstruct the terms of engagement between the particular version of modernity he envisioned and the inescapable relations of production that govern human commerce, personal relations and politics. Where Ramakrishna sought to constrain the world in which he and his disciples lived by suffusing it with a heady symbolic narrative from which all colonial constructions were excluded, Tagore aspired to evacuate colonial ideology by remaking home and world from within the Asian context. He tried to make the private the mirror of the public, the intimate the macrocosmic guide to the political—and thus make it possible to re-enter the public sphere of politics as such without having the terms defined by the colonizer’s modernity. Tagore’s unapologetically utopian attempt was to position “love” as a principle for private action and thought, but also, in an almost Kantian spirit, to elevate it to a public—indeed universal, global—principle for deliberation about social and political issues. With the thread of love as a universal ethical principle he sought to knit together the home and the world—the phrase became the title of one of his most celebrated works, Ghare Baire (The Home and the World), made into a film of the same name by the famous Indian director, Satyajit Ray. But he sought to do more. If India could embrace this universal principle, one could envision a new geopolitical alignment in which “Asia” itself, and an alternative, Asian modernity could be reconfigured as a counterpoint to EuroAmerican modernity.

In the final chapter on Gandhi, I argue that the “Mahatma” developed a rhetoric of the national family, which encapsulated his eccentric if nonetheless traditional and patriarchal but still somewhat effete conception of the individual subject. Gandhi offered a very different spiritual performative than that presented by Ramakrishna. His religiously inflected prescriptions for “soul-force” and “self-reliance” were also an allegory for his dissident political vision of the emergent Indian nation—for Gandhi was nothing if not consummately political. Employing such metaphors as “self-rule” or swaraj, Gandhi sought to yoke the realms of the private and the public, in an important respect analogous to Tagore’s linkage of the “home and the world.” And Gandhi’s vision shared another feature with Tagore’s. Both of them, resisting the pressure of Western universalizing modernity, suffered by comparison with the far more practical-sounding “modernizing” social and political vision embraced by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. The clearest evidence of this unfavorable comparison was that while Nehru became India’s first Prime Minister, Tagore remained in the shadows as the dreamy poet of the Gitanjali; and Gandhi, bitterly disappointed by the Partition of India and Pakistan, was
assassinated shortly following Independence by a Hindu zealot. Gandhi’s use of the family metaphor can be criticized, and was criticized in his own time, by another figure who remained in Nehru’s shadow, although he was instrumental in drafting India’s constitution: Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the leader of the Dalits (“depressed classes”). Despite Gandhi’s preeminence as a beacon of moral resistance (he influenced Martin Luther King, Jr. and Nelson Mandela), Ambedkar, a votary avant la lettre of a postnational counternarrative of modernity, vehemently criticized Gandhi’s resistance to modernity as exclusionary and reactionary.

Although the concluding chapter looks at some length at an example of a feminine “counternarrative of modernity,” most of the book concentrates on the three male figures of Ramakrishna, Tagore and Gandhi. My focus on these male figures is not intended, of course, to privilege masculine visions of India, nor to suggest they themselves had nothing to say about women. Besides, the social place of women, and what might be called sexual difference, was very much at the heart of their project to articulate an alternative masculine subject-position. Questions of gender and imperial rule were linked in a complex imperial formation (Sinha), knitting together conditions in Britain and India, where British masculinity was being performed with possibly greater investment and confidence than it could be back at home in England. There, the rigidity of class hierarchies, among other inconveniences, made it often more difficult to assume such confidence as was available in the “wild East.” The East was not only a career, as Disraeli had it. It was also the Frontier, where British hierarchies could become immaterial or less material, so that the crude purity of racial power provided a tabula rasa for the reconstruction of social identities. British youths from all walks of life came out to the colonies to discover their manhood as well as to enter the world of responsible adulthood and independent livelihood—in a word to become men. Yet for Indian men, it was not only livelihoods but their identity as men that had to be re-negotiated, and the three thinkers on whom I concentrate here had much to say about that masculine identity. Each of the figures discussed in this book presented a dissident vision of the political future for the country, and each of them proffered an alternative construction of the (masculine) subject citizen of the nation as it emerged into political Independence.

The British colonial representation of Indian masculinity was that it was an inferior instance of the model of masculinity brought to a much higher stage of development in British men. The dominant—or reflex—anti-colonialist response was to assert loudly that Indian men were not less manly than the British men: thus Indians celebrated their Pathan, Gurkha,
or Sikh fighters as being as vigorous as any the British could present. This
contest was ultimately circumscribed within a phallic paradigm:
essentially a grown-up pissing contest. And as such it made Indian men
vulnerable, anxious, even ridiculous, because it remained a matter of
meeting the British on their own terms and overcoming their reflexive
self-denigration. As Tanika Sarkar points out, masculinity in colonial
discourse was tied to property relations. Having reduced control of
material wealth and reduced economic prospects also had an impact on
Bengali men’s self-image and self-esteem, making them seem (to
themselves) effeminate (“Hindu Wife” 216). The “babu” was the
preeminent example of the Indian male who tried too hard—he wore his
anxiety to be a mimic (white) man on his sleeve, and made himself the
more ridiculous in every failure to be that man.

By contrast, what Ramakrishna, Tagore, and Gandhi offered were
unrecognizable, because autonomous, models of what an Indian male
could be. These models of counter-masculinities, of alternative forms of
resistance to the colonial narrative of masculinist domination, were
unrecognizable within to the colonizers who were ironically more adept at
dealing with the predictable insurgencies: witness landmark events in
which the British responded—violently—to “native” resistance such as
the “Mutiny” of 1857, the 1919 Jallianwallah Bagh massacre under
General Dyer of hundreds of nationalist protesters, or the Crawling Lane
incident. While the Uprising of 1857, for instance, was clearly brutally
violent, it was a violent resistance that responded in kind to, and even
borrowed from, the extreme violence of the British rule itself (see
Mukherjee 94, 112) The alternative forms of resistance offered by
Ramakrishna, Tagore and Gandhi were sometimes refused by the Indian
political leaders as well, because they seemed ineffective in repelling the
colonizer’s domination. Gandhi offered the most successful alternative,
but he was always thought to be presenting the “weak” face of anticolonial
resistance, and there can be no better evidence of this reaction than his
assassination by Nathuram Godse, a man from his own party. The visions
of India these three thinkers offered ultimately failed in the ideological
contest for political power.

Yet while these alternative visions of cultural identity may have been
unrecognizable to—or misrecognized by—both the British and the
dominant nationalists, it is precisely this unrecognizability that suggests a
potential way beyond the easy binarisms of postcolonial discourse and
metropolitan critique. The sine qua non of resistance to colonial
domination, Edward Said has pointed out, is the colonized’s affirmation of
social or cultural identity. But does this necessarily imply that the
metropolitan culture must immediately recognize that the colonized have their own complete and coherent culture? Could it not be rather that the subsistence of marginalized self-understandings in the context of colonial rule might owe something to their very unrecognizability?

This capacity for cultural self-assertion at the margins is key because it was part and parcel of the thinking behind the colonizer’s *mission civilisatrice*: the colonizer took as his (and the colonial penetration of the colonized land and culture is almost a prototypically masculine metaphor) mandate the presumption that there was no meaningful culture “out there” if he could not recognize it as culture. The failure of the colonizer to see the variety of forms of life in the “areas of darkness” corresponds to what Freud did not understand in women (he christened it darkness). Ironically, it may have been imputed darkness that saved the “dark continents” from the all-too-real darkness of annihilation under the juggernaut on which the white man carried his burden to civilize the brutes.

In exchange for bringing the fruits of modernity and culture, the civilizer assumed the right to take as his due some of the riches the colonized might have to offer, even if they themselves did not know the value of those riches in gold, indigenous knowledge (e.g. medicinal or agricultural wisdom), natural resources including human labor, or whatever and whomever else the colonizer fancied. This arrogation of reward for the service of the civilizing mission is at the basis of the Spanish crown’s endorsement of Columbus’ travels to the lands of spice and gold, in Elizabeth I’s “decision to license” (Ferguson 7) British seamen’s “privateering” against Spanish vessels—Spain being at the time the reigning naval power across the Atlantic. And we can see this privateering in the politics of oil today in Iraq.

That the colonized’s cultural self-assertion (resistance) is an affirmation of a cultural life independent from and opaque to the colonizer is a point Said makes in his brilliant discussion of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad’s genius, he observes,

 allowed him to realize that the ever-present darkness [of Africa] could be colonized or illuminated—*Heart of Darkness* is full of references to the mission civilisatrice . . . . [Conrad was ahead of his time in understanding] that what they call “the darkness” has an autonomy of its own, and can reinvade and reclaim what imperialism had taken for its own. But Marlow and Kurtz are also creatures of their time and cannot take the next step, which would be to recognize that what they saw, disparagingly, as a non-European “darkness” was in fact a non-European world resisting imperialism so as one day to regain sovereignty and independence, and not, as Conrad reductively says, to reestablish the darkness. [*Culture and Imperialism* 29-30]
My title takes this account of resistance as its diacritic, precisely because it signals a specific non-reciprocity. For it has become a commonplace of postcolonial theory that to resist colonialism on its own terms is already to reinscribe its paradigm. The non-reciprocity that interests me is captured in Said’s representation of the Conradian blind spot: the colonizer cannot comprehend the kind of resistance that the African “bush” presents to him because it is not within his discursive orbit. This resistance escapes his grasp because it comes from an occult zone, an alternative universe as it were. It does not merely pose a “No” to the European’s construction of itself as “non-European”—a foil to consolidate the European self-image. It offers an alternative, a cultural challenge that cannot be heard or seen as a No but is still a No. Thus Ramakrishna, Tagore and Gandhi were tellingly regarded by the British as well as by the muscular Indian nationalists as “effete,” their failure to assert “masculinity” being precisely the issue that drew the greatest scorn—whether it be Ramakrishna’s weirdly androgynous performative, Tagore’s seemingly effete embrace of “love” as a political principle, or Gandhi’s spectacularly unmuscular non-violence.

My focus on resistance highlights the assertion of alternative masculinities. The conflicting constructions of gender synecdochically captures a crucial contradiction, a “differend,” as Jean-Francois Lyotard might put it, that makes the colonized’s culture unrecognizable, to the European colonizer. This is in no way to deny that there were women who resisted in a systematic and organized way. Consider the case of Kalpana Dutt, a member of Jugantar, a group waging armed resistance to colonialism in the second and third decades of the twentieth century (P. Bose 128 ff.). Or consider the Telengana People’s Struggle Movement, which I discuss at greater length in the Conclusion chapter as an example of neocolonial resistance in which women participated importantly against the Indian inheritors of power after colonialism. This again was resistance by a marginalized group, demonstrating the continuing relevance of some of the lessons we can learn from marginalized discourses of resistance from the colonial period. Still, here one of my immediate concerns is with alternative masculinities—and the ways in which these models of masculinity remained opaque or at best depreciated forms of resistance.

If we return again to Conrad, we find him representing this non-recognition ironically through the rhetorical figure of recognition. Conrad confers on the narrator Marlow this moment of lucid blindness:

We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there—there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. . . .

No, they [the Africans] were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the
worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar.  
[Heart of Darkness, 105]

This blind insight about shared humanity comes to the European mind “slowly,” a dawning acknowledgement of uncanny cultural continuity. Yet it remains au delà, just beyond conscious inclusion into the discursive frame from which the European can actually function. Marlow can only dimly see the possibility that there might reside the glimmer of meaning in the human life he witnesses: “Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—you so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend” (106). What is captured in this brilliant moment of negative enlightenment (the negative, one might say, of the European Aufklärung) is the obscure liminality of the European’s experience, his transitional trembling before the awful surrender that would constitute a genuine “recognition of the other.” This trembling registers that it is not yet a complete recognition. Besides, Marlow’s moment as an experience of cultural translation (moving from comfortable certainty about the other’s irretrievable difference to unsettling experience of “extimacy” when that other’s cultural distance becomes transformed into intimacy by the dawning recognition of shared humanity) is remarkable precisely for its exceptionality, underscoring the fact that in general Europe has not even arrived at this transitional phase of consciousness of the other as inhabiting an autonomous culture.

Glossing this transitional moment in Conrad as a representative representation of European disavowal of African culture, Achille Mbembe underscores the construction of Africa as unfinished, aboriginal, animal, and, picking up Marlow’s own term, “monstrous” (1-2). Usefully, Mbembe notes that “as a general rule, the experience of the Other, or the problem of the ‘I’ of others and of human beings we perceive as foreign to us, has almost always posed virtually insurmountable difficulties to the Western philosophical and political tradition” (2). It is the “idea of a common human nature, a humanity shared with others” that poses the difficulty, writes Mbembe, and this differend seems absolute in the case of Africa, as though Africans were utterly incomprehensible.

In India colonialist attitudes were more complex; the British in that country did not always dismiss the land—as they did in the case of Africa—as being a “black hole” of reason or culture (Mbembe 7).
Indeed, as he studied the language and especially the texts of the allegedly uncivilized natives, Warren Hastings, who was appointed the first Governor-General in 1773, developed an increasingly respectful attitude to the cultural wisdom of the people he had been charged to govern and civilize. Hastings’ writings often cautioned against the assumption of the natural superiority of the “civilizing” nation, as when he noted that the vast trove of India’s literature “will survive, when the British dominion of India shall have long ceased to exist, and when the sources which it once yielded of wealth and power are lost to remembrance” (qtd. Ferguson 33).

Yet my argument is not that the figures I consider here successfully managed to disabuse the colonizers of the presumption of their cultural superiority. What is remarkable is that they display so little anxiety to convince the Western other of their “sameness.” The anxiety to reject the imputed cultural inferiority of non-Western people or to reaffirm sameness with the colonizer under the category of civilization understood in European terms are two sides of the same coin. They are both evidence of an anxiety to appear as satisfactory in and so conform to the colonizer’s cultural codes of value. The address of the resistant figures I consider is internal or immanent, to the colonized themselves, and implicitly constitutes an exhortation to them to re-discover a regenerate Indian cultural self, not by the via negativa of opposing the colonizer’s construction but finding an indigenous alternative to it. The point is not to beat the colonizer at his own game. Instead the rules of the game are to be changed, even or especially in the colonial context. The dominant discourses of nationalism by contrast fought on more conventional terrain, against the colonizer’s dominion.

The non-relational alternative offered by the figures in question is an alternative, autochthonous modernity: for it is a modernity projected now as both telos and authentic development from one’s own history, insofar as it is not a function of the colonizer’s writing of history. This is what gives a conservative flavor to the pronouncements of Ramakrishna, Tagore and Gandhi, when contrasted with “forward-looking” thinkers such as Subhas Chandra Bose, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, and especially the cosmopolitan secularist and modernist Nehru, although Nehru himself built his liberal modernist vision on an idealist vision of “India’s glorious past wherein lay the universal ‘essence’ of Indianness” (Singh 3, 154-5), and although Nehru himself was also, like Gandhi and Tagore, a critic of Western industrialism (Prakash 203).

But why does that apparent conservatism deserve to be taken seriously at all, even if to recast it in more positive terms? Colonization had the effect of saturating historicity, sapping indigenous traditions of their
regenerative *enargeia*, and of their capacity to produce their future and modernity “on their own terms.” Instinctively Ramakrishna, Tagore and Gandhi grasped that historiography could not be allowed to emerge exclusively from a point of infinity or “universality” encoded in the Western perspective—it was important to see that history in India was sui generis, and so modernity, although alternative, did not have to be “derivative.” Indeed, I have argued here that it did not even have to be recognizable to the dominant discourses.

There were admittedly some problems with the way this alternative modernity was conceptualized: after all these conceptualizations failed in important ways. It is a central concern of my analysis to thematize the specificities of each failure, for each thinker’s vision is invoked as a failed vision de facto: I seek to trace the frailties of their conceptual system as instructive and productive, as an index to their defining marginalization and their particular forms of resisting not only Western modernity but also the dominant indigenous nationalisms.

Such an analysis entails a consideration of questions of method and framing of argument. Contemporary postcolonial critique tends to homogenize or neglect the diverse material realities of the postcolony in order more efficiently to theorize resistance to colonialism: the focus tends not to be to dissect the divergences, discrepancies or contradictions among forms of response to colonialism because the target of attention, the enemy, needs to be kept firmly in view at all times. But there is a risk in obscuring the specific densities of lived experience among the colonized: the experience of women under colonialism was not identical with what the men suffered; and not all male subjects had the same experience. There were differences among people of different social station or class. Thus I suggest that Ramakrishna’s cadre of male disciples flocked to him because he was sensitive to their specific—caste-, gender- and class-determined—experience of colonial domination, and that this narrow appeal to a small group of acolytes was a limitation, if not a liability.

Contemporary cultural critique also tends to elevate the reigning truisms of gender, politics, and social agency to the status of shibboleths so that affect, for instance, falls out of the analytic frame. This may be partly why it has been hard for *theory* even to apprehend (let alone take seriously) Tagore’s meditation on love as an ethicopolitical principle. My discussion of his ideas as presented in his writings on nationalism as well as in his most famous novel seeks to rehabilitate him as a considerable alternative voice in the community that was being imagined as independent India, while recognizing the shortcomings of his vision.
A final point about the frame of analysis. In much recent critical orthodoxy, the nation itself is seen as a unitary and homogenous counterpart to the colonizer’s institutions and geopolitical identity: the impulse here is to assert that the colonized are as much a sovereign nation as the colonizer’s own. As my discussion of Gandhi’s ideas suggests, this homogenization represents a gross oversimplification of the social reality. I show not only that Gandhi offered a marginal counternarrative of nation but that Gandhi’s alternative vision was rejected or deprecated by other interests—something that is not often made explicit in postcolonial commentary. One of the chief framers of the new nation’s constitution, B.R. Ambedkar, vehemently declined to share either Gandhi’s vision or that of the dominant nationalists, although he could not, as the voice of the “Untouchables,” afford not to participate in the process of nation building even though he felt that he could not fully embrace it.

Thus, in each case, I have not shied away from explicitly thematizing the liabilities of the vision of the three figures. But why then insist that they offer models of alternative modernities that deserve our continued attention? Does this formulation not reinscribe the categories that sustain the Western paradigm as universal rather than challenge it through the adjective “alternative”? In speaking of an alternative modernity I do not intend unwittingly to return to the evolutionist hierarchy of West over non-West. The non-West may be affirmed as being “modern” in a different way, but this could mean it is alternative only within the paradigm already defined by the West and exemplified by it, and also less developed than the West even if “modern” in an alternative fashion. “Modernity” itself might be a terminological trap.

One example of what was “alternative” about the modernity to which the thinkers I consider aspired to was that they were not averse to including a religious or spiritual element in their framing of “modernity.” Whereas in Enlightenment modernity such an element would have been regarded as a constraint on the individual exercise of reason, I show in this book that neither Tagore nor Gandhi saw any reason to pit rationality against religion. Even more striking was Ramakrishna’s performative: in its intense thematization of darśan (the traditional doctrine of “the gaze,” which I develop as a double-voiced concept that has productive analogies with a Lacanian notion of the gaze), this was a route to self-transcendence and situational transcendence over the harsh social and political realities facing him and his acolytes. It was a striking counternarrative to the dominant nationalist rhetoric as well as to the narrative of modernity. So too was Tagore’s seemingly sentimental journey into an unorthodox reconceptualization of India’s and Asia’s position in a geopolitical frame,