



Nabarun Bhattacharya

**Aesthetics and Politics in a
World after Ethics**

Edited by

Sourit Bhattacharya, Arka Chattopadhyay, Samrat Sengupta

BLOOMSBURY

‘This is an exceptional and painstaking work of rare dedication that is structurally expansive and conceptually rigorous. Most significantly, the editors and the team of translators, interviewers and critical essayists have elegantly woven a complex tapestry of aesthetics, politics and ethics that marks one of the most involved, committed and intricate authors of our time. The book radiantly brings to light the myriad trajectories through which Nabarun Bhattacharya was able to catch and express the deepest undertones of our overwrought times.

Beneath that tale lies another layer—that, like all true political prophets, Bhattacharya could presciently prefigure and predict—an ominous and macabre sublunar future, the contours of which continue to remain spectral and contingent.’

—Professor Prasanta Chakravarty,
Department of English, University of Delhi

‘This is a timely introduction to Nabarun, a major activist writer of minor literature, inhabiting the borderlands of the ubiquitous modern order of capital, in the space-time of contemporary Kolkata. The book contains short stories, poems, an interview with the writer and essays on him—a well-curated collection, offering a rounded representation of Nabarun. As the book highlights, the deep subaltern denizens of Nabarun’s world may be voided of agency and use but can’t be voided of the imagination of freedom. Through the intervention of this text, Nabarun’s radical insight and technologies of posthuman praxis will be available widely, inspiring many versions of another kind of life, a plural participatory anarchy of friendship.’

—Debashish Banerji,
*Haridas Chaudhuri Professor of Indian Philosophies and Cultures and
Doshi Professor of Asian Art, California Institute of Integral Studies
(CIIS), San Francisco, CA*

Nabarun Bhattacharya

Nabarun Bhattacharya

*Aesthetics and Politics in a
World after Ethics*

Edited by

Sourit Bhattacharya, Arka Chattopadhyay and
Samrat Sengupta

B L O O M S B U R Y
NEW DELHI • LONDON • OXFORD • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY INDIA
Bloomsbury Publishing India Pvt. Ltd
Second Floor, LSC Building No. 4, DDA Complex, Pocket C – 6 & 7,
Vasant Kunj, New Delhi 110070

BLOOMSBURY, BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC INDIA and the Diana logo are trademarks of
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in India 2020
This edition published 2020

Copyright © Sourit Bhattacharya, Arka Chattopadhyay, Samrat Sengupta 2020

Sourit Bhattacharya, Arka Chattopadhyay, Samrat Sengupta have asserted their right under the
Indian Copyright Act to be identified as Editors of this work

Bloomsbury Academic
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or
by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information
storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc does not have any control over, or responsibility for, any third-party
websites referred to or in this book. All internet addresses given in this book were correct at the
time of going to press. The author and publisher regret any inconvenience caused if addresses
have changed or sites have ceased to exist, but can accept no responsibility for any such changes

ISBN: HB: 978-93-88630-50-4; eBook: 978-93-88630-51-1
ePdf: 978-93-89812-48-0

Typeset in Minion Pro by Manipal Technologies Limited

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc makes every effort to ensure that the papers used in the manufacture
of our books are natural, recyclable products made from wood grown in well-managed forests.
Our manufacturing processes conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com and sign up for our
newsletters

Contents

<i>Foreword</i> by Supriya Chaudhuri	ix
<i>Preface</i> by Tathagata Bhattacharya	xiii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xv
<i>Nabarun Bhattacharya and His World: An Introduction</i> by Sourit Bhattacharya, Arka Chattopadhyay and Samrat Sengupta	xvii

Part I: Nabarun Bhattacharya's Works in Translation

Short Stories

Immersion, translation by <i>Rijula Das</i>	3
Scarecrow, translation by <i>Rijula Das</i>	7
Fyataru in Spring Festival, translation by <i>Debadrita Bose</i>	17
4+1, translation by <i>Arka Chattopadhyay</i>	24
Toy, translation by <i>Arka Chattopadhyay</i>	30
Leopard-Man, translation by <i>V. Ramaswamy</i>	34
Terrorist, translation by <i>V. Ramaswamy</i>	40
American Petromax, translation by <i>V. Ramaswamy</i>	46
Nuclear Winter, translation by <i>Sourit Bhattacharya</i>	51

Poems

This Valley of Death Is Not My Country, translation by <i>Atindriya Chakrabarty</i>	61
Who in the Moonlight, with Rifles on Shoulders..., translation by <i>Atindriya Chakrabarty</i> and <i>Malini Bhattacharya</i>	65
What Kind of City Is This, translation by <i>Supriya Chaudhuri</i>	67
Tram, translation by <i>Supriya Chaudhuri</i>	68
Something's Burning, translation by <i>Supriya Chaudhuri</i>	70
Type, translation by <i>Samrat Sengupta</i>	72

Disabled Three, translation by <i>Samrat Sengupta</i>	73
A Family Poem, translation by <i>Samrat Sengupta</i>	74

Interview with Nabarun Bhattacharya

There Is an Uncanny Pluralism in Marxism, translation by <i>Partha Pratim Roy Chowdhury</i>	79
---	----

Part II: Critical Essays on Nabarun Bhattacharya

Kolkata and the Poetics of Waste in Nabarun Bhattacharya's <i>Spectral City</i> , <i>Anuparna Mukherjee</i>	99
Fyataru As Political Society: Nabarun Bhattacharya and the Postcolonial Politics of the Governed, <i>Anindya Sekhar Purakayastha</i>	116
Counter-History, Counter-Memory and the <i>Harami</i> : The Fictional World of <i>Kangal Malshat</i> , <i>Anustup Basu</i>	132
A Cyborg Goddess? Baby K and the Symbolisms of Gendered Violence, <i>Priyanka Basu</i>	148
Dancing Skulls and Red Hibiscus Flowers: Nabarun's Tantric Imaginaries and the Radical Aesthetics of Subversion, <i>Carola Erika Lorea</i>	163
The Revolt of the <i>Bête Machine</i> : Animality, Language and Resistance in <i>Lubdhak</i> , <i>Aritra Chakraborti</i>	179
Machine, Bio-Politics and Death in Nabarun Bhattacharya's Fiction, <i>Arka Chattopadhyay</i>	194
# <i>Animalosa</i> : A Study of the Theroid Cosmic in Nabarun's Fiction, <i>Dibyakusum Ray</i>	208
Toxic Ecologies of the Global South: The Ecogothic in Nabarun Bhattacharya's <i>Toy City</i> , <i>Sourit Bhattacharya</i>	221
The Unknown Something: Objects beyond the Economy of Use in Nabarun's Short Stories, <i>Samrat Sengupta</i>	237
' <i>Fyant Fyant Snai Snai</i> '—The Clarion Call of the Masses and Bengali Entertainment, <i>Arnab Banerji</i>	251
<i>Index</i>	267
<i>List of Contributors</i>	279

Foreword

This book on the aesthetics and politics of Nabarun Bhattacharya comes at a critical moment in global politics as in Indian history, one that might have drawn a savage, satirical response from Nabarun himself. Much of his work is haunted by a darkly prescient foreshadowing of postmodern apocalypse. Despite the cult status and devoted following Nabarun Bhattacharya enjoys in contemporary Bengali literary circles, this is to my knowledge the first extended study of his work in English, offering translations of primary sources (an interview with the author and several of his poems and stories) and eleven long critical essays, as well as an editorial introduction. The editors are to be congratulated on their devotion to a difficult task and the critical intelligence with which they have focused on the key features of Nabarun Bhattacharya's revolutionary aesthetics. These include his fierce dismantling of the illusions that sustain the capitalist culture; the black humour with which he subverts the conventions of realism while focusing on marginal existences, the lives of the underclass; his linguistic and generic inventiveness and, above all, his dissolution of the boundaries between human, non-human animal and thing.

The radical power of Nabarun Bhattacharya's vision, 'in a world after ethics', lies precisely in his moral interrogation of contemporary society, politics and art: in his awareness that a world founded on violence and exploitation is ultimately self-destructive, and that the oppressed will rise. In some ways this is figured by a recurrent image in his work, that of the explosion—whether of the human bomb or of a hidden stockpile of weapons. Yet, in a richly absurdist oeuvre, such explosions are rarely the product of conscious intention, of a revolutionary enterprise dedicated to the destruction of class enemies. Rather, they occur by accident or oversight, through the self-conflagration of incendiary material that has, we realise, accumulated over time. Thus, instead of a narrative of revolutionary progress, of the kind that preoccupied his Communist forebears, Nabarun Bhattacharya's poetics are imbricated

in a far bleaker landscape of waste, decay and death—in which we sense, as he writes in one of his poems, that:

Something's burning
In front of everyone, right before your eyes,
Amidst all the people
Homeland!

For a Marxist poet, novelist and political commentator, writing in a dystopian world, one that has abandoned both the principles of social justice and the pretence of benign power, such a vision is compounded equally of melancholy and anarchic humour. Whether in the volume of poems with which he burst on the Bengali literary scene, *Ei Mrityu Upatyaka Amar Desh Noy* (*This Valley of Death Is Not My Country*, 1973), or in his first two novels, *Harbart* (1993) and *Kangal Malsat* (2003), Nabarun Bhattacharya sought to subvert the conventions of social realism that had ruled left-wing Bengali literary representation, replacing them by a rich medley of motifs taken from popular culture and occult practise, a language that freely employed slang and obscenity, and a vision of subaltern actors ascending to take their place in the sky as a tribe of Fyatarus, winged offenders against social propriety and complacency. The subversive task of the radical writer, as Nabarun sees it, is, thus, not to preach revolution, but to employ his aesthetics as a form of politics: to upset hierarchy by elevating the downtrodden, to unsettle bhadralok sensibility by scatological humour and to disenchant our technological urban utopias by imagining fantastic weapons of mass destruction.

In its choice of literary material as well as of critical themes, this book explores the many aspects of Nabarun's vision: its obsession with waste, filth and detritus, its focus on destruction and death, its vision of a dystopic city, its critique of class and caste and its use of language to subvert literary propriety. What is particularly striking, however, is its attention to a distinctive but little-explored aspect of his work, its post-humanist dissatisfaction with an anthropocentric universe, as expressed in a deep concern with the lives of non-human animals and of objects. Nabarun, always a cerebral and self-conscious writer, himself reflected on this concern, seeing it—at least sometimes—as

a way of escape from the greed and rapacity of the human race that appears to have appointed itself the task of destroying our planet. In the novella *Lubdhak* (2000), a human proposal to commit animal genocide (in order to rid the city of stray cats and dogs) requires its animal protagonists, faced with the threat of extinction, to organise themselves for the purpose of resistance. In the end, they do indeed evacuate the city, but only because they realise—as humans have failed to do—that it is doomed. That sense of an ending—a catastrophe compounded by human obtuseness, cruelty and folly on the one hand, and environmental disaster on the other—is everywhere in Nabarun's fiction. It is what makes his writing most relevant today. I congratulate the contributors to this volume for a remarkable and timely undertaking.

—Supriya Chaudhuri

Preface

I am possibly not the best person to write a preface to a book dedicated to the analyses and criticisms of Nabarun Bhattacharya's works. One reason is that I do not have formal training in literary theories, and my education has been essentially in the realm of social sciences. But then, an understanding of cultural anthropology and sociological changes is actually a great enabler while trying to understand a writer like him. But again, Nabarun never took literary criticism seriously. When his first novel, *Harbart*, came out as a book in the 1990s, the biggest critic of the Bengali cultural establishment of the day wrote in his review in a leading Bengali newspaper, 'Such language and imagery have no place in Bengali literature. This book will also fade from the memory of readers in a few years.' Notwithstanding, *Harbart* went on to win the highest literary award given by the Government of India (Sahitya Akademi), despite the fact that Nabarun had little regard for awards and prizes; a fresh English translation of the novel has been brought out by Seagull Books and then by New Directions, both of which are known for publishing serious writers. *Harbart* has also come out in German. Translations of a lot of his works other than *Harbart* are now available in French, Italian and Czech. An Italian translation of *Kangal Malshat* has come out recently. Today, five years after his death, Nabarun is threatening to just not being limited to a cult Bengali writer. Rather, the tilapia from Calcutta's fish tank is hitting faraway shores. Nabarun was very clear about his views on literary criticism. 'I write. They critique. Not the other way around. I do not write keeping in mind what they will appreciate' was his clear thought.

Nabarun was a complex writer, not least because he was interested in so many things in this world and beyond. His voracious appetite for reading was rarely satiated. From the geography of witchcraft to Mughal gardening, the nitty-gritty of the Russian Revolution to the economics of the Space Race, his knowledge was encyclopaedic. His literary universe spanned nearly all continents of this world as well

as many languages of India. There were some recurring themes and beliefs that fascinated him. ‘Death’ and ‘The Buddha’ were constants here. While he believed in Communism, its anthropocentrism, doctrinal rigidity and historical cruelties disturbed him. There were questions in his mind. For example, if Bukharin and Preobrazhensky were right on the incompatibility of religion and communism, then how the number of Russian Orthodox churches had multiplied by eighty times in the 1942–1945 period when Stalin, the architect of the Atheist Five Year Plan, was still very much in the saddle? One can go on and on. It is not possible to sum up a person who was so involved in his work, used words as ‘Molotov cocktail’ and deliberately created characters to subvert the placid waters of Bengali literature and gave political literature possibly a new hope in the times of despair. I think Nabarun will be remembered as someone who grasped and painted a changing society in all his honest ruthlessness, and for his utter rejection of anthropocentrism that is possibly going to destroy the planet we inhabit and wipe out every species in the coming future.

—Tathagata Bhattacharya

Acknowledgements

An edited collection is a product of teamwork. It demands good communication between editors and contributors as well as between the editors themselves, and patience and thorough editing skills. For a collection that introduces a relatively lesser-known Bengali author, Nabarun Bhattacharya, to a global audience by including not only critical essays on him but also translations of his creative work, the element of understanding, patience and teamwork becomes vital. We would like to thank all our contributors for their insightful work, timely submission, rigorous revision and genuine understanding and warmth. It has been both challenging and exciting to work with a team of translators and academics which gives the book its unique demeanour and appeal.

We would also like to thank Tathagata Bhattacharya for giving us the copyright permission to translate from Nabarun Bhattacharya's stories, poems and interview. Our sincere thanks to Prof. Supriya Chaudhuri for writing a 'Foreword' to this book.

Finally, this book would not have been possible without the support from Bloomsbury. Our heartfelt thanks to Chandra Sekhar, who believed in the project from the beginning and guided us throughout with his prompt responses, practical suggestions and production-related support.

Nabarun Bhattacharya and His World: An Introduction

Sourit Bhattacharya, Arka Chattopadhyay and Samrat Sengupta

I

'This very moment of the cruel sovereign demonstrates the need for a new clock and time'

—Nabarun Bhattacharya (2016: 107)

Nabarun Bhattacharya: Aesthetics and Politics in a World after Ethics aims to introduce the Bengali writer (1948–2014) to a pan-Indian and global audience by presenting some of his short stories and poems in English translation and offering a series of critical readings of his works. As the above quote from one of his pieces on the contemporary post-millennial moment suggests, his literary imagination is geared towards a time which is unborn and which departs from the order of things at present, which he calls the 'moment of the cruel sovereign'. His aesthetics is informed by the politics of resistance and transcendence from the order of world capitalism as well as the shape it takes in a postcolonial nation-state like India, and more particularly in the state of West Bengal. Yet Nabarun's literary world does not remain confined solely to the 'local'. It traverses the local and stretches along spaces of suffering such as the war-damaged zones of Iraq or Afghanistan, the victims of neo-liberal politics like in rural China or the Indian state of Bihar and even the authoritarian communist regime of Russia. He portrays such suffering alongside the neo-liberal consumerist vision of a happy life and a seamless, easily accessible enjoyment. This latter vision invisibilises and justifies the lateral damage done to the expendable 'other', who often needs to be sacrificed for the maintenance of the consumerist world order. Nabarun's works, while critiquing this 'moment' of the capital, also thinks of a transcendence which is not always equivalent to the programmatic and the possible modes of resistance.

A deeply political writer, Nabarun's career could be roughly divided into three segments which often overlap, both temporally and ideationally. His first short story 'Bhashan' ('Immersion') was published in the literary magazine *Parichay* in 1968, a year that indicates an epochal moment both in Indian and world politics. While, on the one hand, there was the May 1968 uprising in France, the Scandinavian countries and most of Europe as well as in the US and parts of South America, the Indian radical left peasant movement of Naxalbari, on the other hand, was in full swing after its 'official' eruption on 24 May 1967. Nabarun's most celebrated poem, and most likely his first published poem, 'Ei Mrityu Upatyaka Amar Desh Na' ('This Valley of Death Is Not My Country') came out in 1972, first in a collection of revolutionary poems, and then in 1973, re-published in Nabarun's own anthology based on the name of the poem (Bhattacharya 2004 [1973]: 11–15). It was written in response to a mass-murder of youth activists of the Naxalbari movement. Being a committed Marxist and a visionary, Nabarun's writing in this period, roughly from 1968 to early 1980s, engages with issues such as state-sponsored violence, revolutionary sacrifice, social conditions of urban destitution, the trauma of the failure of the revolution ruthlessly massacred by state machinery, etc. The second phase of his writing (roughly from 1980s to the end of 1990s) involves a moment of post-revolutionary crisis and the existential condition of humans in an emergent consumerist world order that eventually culminates into the fall of Soviet Russia as well as that of the long-sustained dream of a communist future. This period focuses more on the crisis of making sense of the rapidly changing world. Shaped by these world-historical transitions, Nabarun's writing now delves into a planetary consciousness about man, animal and nature, especially when there appears to be a profound absurdity of considering humanist post-Enlightenment thinking as pivotal to the world order. Short stories like 'Andho Beral' ('The Blind Cat', 1997) or novels such as *Herbert*¹ (1993),

1 The title of the novel has been spelled differently in different English translations. While two of the three English translations have spelled the title 'Herbert', Arunava Sinha's translation, however, is titled 'Harbart'. Authors in this collection have used the spelling of the title as 'Herbert' and the character in the novel as 'Harbart' to retain the Bengali idiosyncrasies in pronunciation. Only in cases where Arunava Sinha's English translation has been used, the novel and the character are spelled as 'Harbart'.

which won him numerous awards and has been translated several times into English, were written in this period. The third phase of Nabarun's writing (in the 21st century) contains a strong challenge of the realistic within reality with the literary creation of the flying miscreants, Fyatarus; and the occult-empowered black magicians, Choktars, who together hatch a revolutionary armed violence in the city; or of the figure of the 'whore', Baby K, who drinks petrol and is highly inflammable, and, in one of the stories, uses her petrol-induced inflammability to explode the American soldiers involved in the Iraq war. These figures emerge from the margins of the mainstream society and could only transcend their existential conditions by resorting to the unreal and the undecidable damages to the system. The disenfranchised suffering 'other' of mainstream civilisation and society, therefore, does not remain determined only by the real time of capitalist civilisation but, through such narratives, imagines an alternative frame of imagined time-space where apparently impossible things can take place.

The popularity of Nabarun as a literary figure was confined to Bengali *avant-garde* literary circles till the 1990s. It expanded further only after this third phase of his writing which allowed a mixing of the serious with the trivial, bordering on radical populism. His claim to fame was the publication of *Kangal Malshat* (*The War Cry of the Vagabonds*, 2003) which introduces, more compellingly, the characters of Fyatarus and Choktars; and the first collection of Fyataru stories—*Fyatarur Bombachak* (2004). By the early years of 2000, performances of Fyataru stories in theatrical forms (under the direction of Debesh Chattopadhyay), especially with the hilarious and obscene expletives from the Fyataru poet Purandar Bhat (whose name 'Purandar' literally means the one who destroys the city) and the general anti-establishment spirit of the works, caught the imagination widely of the students and the youth in the postcolonial city of Kolkata. On the other hand, such fame, confined only to one kind of his writing, often relegated other important works to a margin. In this book, while we engage with Nabarun's more popular works, we also focus on his other writings and the numerous important issues, simultaneously global and local, that his writings have touched upon, alongside the phenomenon of populism in his writings and cultism around his figure. His use of the popular, the trivial and the mundane, as some essays in the collection will

show, also questions the separation and reification of the intellectual class from the so-called 'masses', who are considered unimportant and stupid by people with social capital and cultural empowerment.

Another particular factor that has contributed to Nabarun's popularity is the cinematic adaptation of his novel, *Herbert*, by Suman Mukhopadhyay in 2005. The mundane world of the half-crazed clairvoyant commoner, Harbart was pitted against the moment of Naxalbari movement in which he got accidentally involved. The film, following the novel, brings back the dream of revolutionary resistance into the neo-liberal world order. The explosion of bombs stuffed and planted by Harbart's Naxalite nephew Binu, inside his uncle's quilt after the suicidal death of the eponymous protagonist, points at resistance as the sphere of the unanticipated, lying beyond the horizons of pragmatic comprehension. Moreover, in the world of 'serious' Bengali cinema occupied by the topics of drawing-room drama and crisis of relationship among upwardly mobile people, *Herbert* was a fresh lease of life for an audience waiting for the re-emergence of the 'political' in the public. Though the film was not a huge box-office success, it received considerable critical attention and the Silver Lotus National award for the best feature film in Bengali in 2006, building up a fresh readership for Nabarun. Suman Mukhopadhyay then also adapted *Kangal Malshat* to screen in 2015 amidst challenges from state authorities regarding the film's deeply political, anti-establishment rhetoric. More recently, film-maker Qaushiq (or Q as he is popularly known by) has made a documentary on Nabarun, available on YouTube. As we put together this volume, an English translation of Nabarun's *Kangal Malshat* is under way while an Italian translation of the novel is already published. Along with an open access journal issue on Nabarun compiled by two of the editors involved in the book for *Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry* (2.1 supplement), which involves English translations of some of his works and with translated works in this volume, Nabarun's works are available for a global readership. This volume, which comes after a critically acclaimed and popular Bengali critical compendium on his work by one of the editors included here, is a way to extend his readership and to point at the world literary nature of his work.

II

A writer like Nabarun writes on an international scale. His stories travel frequently from India to Russia and China, from Germany and France to Australia, in search of the 'world's last communist' (the title of one of his stories). Emboldened by a Communist idea of the international, Nabarun performs a scale-switching from the regional to the cosmic, as he shifts from the city of Kolkata to earth as a planet, about to be destroyed by the clash of a meteorite, in the novel *Lubdhak* (*Sirius*, 2006). Thus, he needs to be established beyond the boundaries of the Indian vernacular, as an important figure in the pantheon of contemporary world literature. The Sahitya-Akademi-award-winning novel *Herbert* (1993) has been translated into English, thrice by three different translators, the third being a new 2019 international edition from the New York-based press, New Directions. Reviews of this international edition have come out in important literary magazines like *The Paris Review*. The trend of international recognition continues with a German translation of *Herbert* and an Italian translation of *Kangal Malshat* (*War Cry of the Vagabonds*; 2003).

We can see how a political commitment to literature frames Nabarun Bhattacharya's aesthetic project, and the volume wishes to tease out various perspectives on this meeting of politics and aesthetics. Nabarun was a life-long Marxist whose political views veered from the ultra-left to a mature eco-Marxist position. He is the son of Bengali leftist playwright Bijan Bhattacharya and novelist-activist Mahasweta Devi, whose works have been translated and written on by several scholars, including Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Nabarun draws on this leftist lineage but stands unique as a writer, departing significantly from the run-of-the-mill Bengali Marxist literary tradition. A strong commitment to representing the oppressive urban conditions within which the downtrodden live and a revolutionary belief that the status-quo will be overthrown by the poor often orient his early to middle-period writings. Later, Nabarun shows further interest in questions of the non-human animal and the environment at large, asking us to understand the proportion and the nature of capitalist/anthropocentric violence, inflicted on human and nonhuman beings/objects in everyday

life. Be it the novel on dogs, *Lubdhak* (*Sirius*), or on petro-capitalism and dystopia (*KhelnaNagar/Toy City*) and the machine (*Auto*), the political question in Nabarun echoes significant contemporary issues, such as animal rights, global warming and techno-capitalism. This opens up the possibility of questioning the traditional paradigm of humanist values in a world of catastrophic and violent encounters, such as nuclear war or holocaust, which keeps returning in Nabarun's works. It makes his work relevant to readers interested in the field of critical humanism and posthumanism.

His texts give voice to the marginal figures in the lowest stratum of the society, damaged variously by forces of capitalism, globalisation or ecological change, in a language which follows the everyday use of cuss-words in what can be called a major literary breakthrough in the Bengali language. This aspect of Nabarun demands a reading through the subaltern framework—another important practise in contemporary political historiography. In our day, when Dalit studies is getting widely acknowledged as a crucial field in South Asian politics, Nabarun's unrelenting engagement with the downtrodden and the oppressed deserves a serious critical excursus both at the level of his language and his content. On another note, the relative lack of strong female characters in his work calls for a feminist critique that takes into consideration his complex portrayal of revolutionary masculinity.

While Nabarun's content is unmistakably political, he is one writer whose form remains aesthetically experimental. *Kangal Malshat's* playful language and a literary form that incorporates diverse discursive components like images, newspaper ads, etc. is a case in point. As contemporary political thought centralises the dialogue of politics and aesthetics (consider, for example, the French philosopher Jacques Rancière's book, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 2003), Nabarun's fusion of revolutionary content with seemingly postmodern form needs to be unpacked, not only in terms of the art-politics encounter but also through other critical lenses, like the conjunction of Marxism and modernity and/or postmodernism and postcolonialism. The extended history of Kolkata's colonial past that Nabarun's novels trace, for example, makes a situated historical reading necessary. This is not to say that he does not transcend local colours. On the other hand,

like a truly international author, he navigates seamlessly between a Kolkata genocide, during the Naxalite movement in the 1970s Bengal, and the famished dying children in Gaza during the Israel–Palestine conflict. And yet, his texts also stage a complex socio-political critique of globalisation, for example, in a series of stories on Soviet Russia. His consistent yet unconventional engagement with the question of terror in various short stories like ‘Terrorist’ or ‘Fyataru and the Global Terror’ makes him contemporary and relevant. He equally draws upon the question of violence at various levels and refers to revolutionary violence of Naxalbari, police encounters and custodial torture or mass extermination in concentration camp in his fictional and poetic renderings. Nabarun’s works are, thus, transnational in the proper sense of the term.

If we consider his literary lineage, he fruitfully brings the Russian novelist Mikhail Bulgakov and 19th-century Bengali satirists like Troilokyanath Mukhopadhyay in the same bracket by pursuing an international tradition that breaks boundaries of canonical literature. The rich repository of various indigenous occult practises is widely utilised in Nabarun’s works, in a way that it shows how the rise of 19th-century oral and literary tantric ‘occult’ traditions impacted ‘local’ art or more globally makes him into a silent partner to the philosopher Jacques Derrida who considers ghosts to be pivotal to Marxian politics (*Spectres of Marx*, 1993). A large corpus of postcolonial Latin American and African writings have used the trope of ghosts for revolutionary politics (e.g. Isabella Allende’s *The House of the Spirits*, Juan Rulfo’s *Pedro Paramo*, Pepetela’s *The Return of the Water Spirit*, Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Matigari*, Ivan Vasilavich’s *Portrait with Keys*, etc.). This would place Nabarun in the map of contemporary world literature of Marxism and resistance. From a different point of view, Nabarun’s manifold references to the occult from necromancy to seance are representative of an Indian *episteme*, vastly different from the western knowledge-system, colonially imposed on the sub-continent.

Nabarun’s simultaneously internationalist and local use of avant-gardism has been a matter of much debate within the Bengali literary sphere. To cite one recent example (from an English essay), Supriya Chaudhuri notes that the growth and development of the

‘novel’ as a literary form in Bengal was related with the region’s own aesthetic forms as well as its critical engagements with ‘western’ modernity (Chaudhuri 2012: 101–123). The two legacies of Bengali literary modernity, she mentions in the first part of her essay, are very much alive in Nabarun’s works. The auto-critical humor in the early prose writings of Kaliprasanna Singha or Tekchand Thakur on the emergent colonial upper-middle class and the astute critique of the same class by Bankimchandra and his successors are repeatedly featured in Nabarun’s prose which he mixes with the other legacy of *battala sahitya* (*battala* literally means ‘beneath the banyan tree’ and suggests something akin to what the railway novels in Victorian England meant for popular consumption). Characters like Nabani Dhar in the *Fyataru* stories (an author of bawdy pornographic novels) or Purandar Bhat (a poet who first appeared in *Kangal Malshat* and who writes using expletives and street language) in Nabarun challenges the refined discourse of middle-class *bhadraloks*. They are an obvious reference to the ‘other’ legacy of Bengali modernity, which is more democratic, everyday and multicultural and goes beyond the narrow sphere of educated elites possessing cultural and social capital in a postcolonial society. Here it is important to note that the cultural hiatus between the elite and the proletariat has been a critical focus from 1930 onwards in Bengali modernist writings which were deeply influenced by Marxist literary circles such as the Progressive Writers’ Association or journals such as *Parichay* (Das 2003: 8–12). While celebrated novelists like Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, Manik Bandyopadhyay, Adwaita Mallabarman or, at a later stage, Mahasweta Devi represented lives of farmers, fishermen, tribals or the urban proletariat, their representations were ‘largely’, albeit critically and heterogeneously, realist. Nabarun’s primary engagement with city life brings the worlds of the underprivileged and the downtrodden together with the worlds of the socially secure to induce irony and dark humour. His portrayal of class-struggle both draws from and challenges ‘realism’ in its content and form. There, he breaks from earlier modernists and moves towards the world of ‘fantasy, surreal farce and linguistic and narrative experiment’ (Chaudhuri 2012: 122), forcing the portrayal of the struggle towards a classless future

into an 'undecidable' form. Here, he follows the legacy and influence of other literary avant-garde figures of 1970s and 1980s like Subimal Mishra or movements such as the *Hungry Generation*, which wanted to break away from the derivative use of the realist form of Bengali literary modernity.

Nabarun's experimentalism as a formally sophisticated writer does not undercut the political conviction of his corpus. On the contrary, it enhances the political. Herein lies the meeting point of aesthetics and politics for him. His works espouse an ethic that bonds aesthetics with politics by combining avant-garde form (one may remember the palimpsest-like form of *Kangal Malshat* or the intertextual cut-ups in *Harbart* and *Lubdhak*) with explicit political content. Quite unlike the European avant-garde tradition that primarily approached the political through the decay of the aesthetic, in Nabarun, the politics of the avant-garde is not just about an anti-representational politics of eclectic forms. In his writings, political discontent as a thematic content breaks into a linear realistic form to wreak havoc with it. As a result, what we have in Nabarun is an intense politicisation of avant-garde forms. This avant-gardism is so endemic to Nabarun's politics, vision, and writing and so widely discussed in critical endeavours on him (both in Bengali and English; for English see specifically the special issue on Nabarun in *Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry* (2015) as well as works by Sourit Bhattacharya, Dibyakusum Ray and Madhuja Mukherjee, among others) that we chose not to devote a full essay on this area. On the other hand, because Nabarun's aesthetics and politics are inseparable, none of the essays in this book are able to bypass this aspect.

As the crisis of parliamentary democracy becomes a major global discussion, Nabarun's works, which have shown an abiding faith in non-doctrinaire forms of Marxism and Leftism, and which have always raised critical questions about the democratic practise in India, can be instructive in more ways than one. His works, expectedly, have equally drawn upon the crisis of the back-footing of Marxist ideology in the 1990s across the globe, as he portrays the crisis of Communism and brings in the complex question of counter-revolution in the globalised world. Instead of solely following the traditional Marxist narratives of programmatic class-struggle, his works are intercepted heavily

with populist modes of narration, humour, irony, absurdity or the irrational. Yet, his works frequently talk about rupture and radical opening towards a future to come. His writings are strongly futuristic and future-oriented.

This book, as an introductory volume on Nabarun, collects critical essays and translations of some of his poems and short stories, not to mention an interview that will familiarise readers with his visions and imaginings, his thoughts and readings and his beliefs and ideologies as a writer. The essays largely aim at presenting Nabarun's works in the light of ethical and political crisis in a world where no simple, monochromatic idea of doing justice to all, irrespective of experiences of marginality and various forms of subjugations, can be sustained. Ethics is conceptualised here as an approximation of the impossible task of addressing the 'other' (such as the animal, the thing, the economical or gendered subaltern) without co-opting with or subjugating its alterity to a hegemonic political order—a task which has the tendency to remain incomplete. The editors believe that Nabarun's oeuvre depicts such a world of ethical dilemma and a lack of unquestionable faith in a preordained idea of justice. It can also chronologically trace (as his creative world changes from 1970s to the current post-millennium world) the transition into such a supposed 'post-ethical world'. Ranging from state repression of India's Naxalbari revolution in the 1960s and 1970s when anti-state, anti-institutional radical political movements were rampant until the present crisis of global terror, this volume will show how Nabarun's works have not only captured the major moments of crisis plaguing postcolonial India or a global world order but have also consistently problematised questions of ethics, politics and aesthetics. From the moral intellectual crisis of both the traditional and the radical Left, up to the spread of consumerist economy and the birth of the new global middle-classes (who, even now, often shelve the question of justice in lieu of a life of seamless individual success and material gratification), it is difficult to find any easy explanation to the question of right politics, ethics and justice. The essays in this volume attempt to show how Nabarun's aesthetic world encounters this crisis and yet his aesthetic politics makes us feel the desire and necessity for taking up an ethical position.

III

The poems and stories translated here are selected from different phases of Nabarun's career and can, thus, ably point at his thoughts and radical transition in style and politics. Translated attentively by Rijula Das, V Ramaswamy, Debadrita Bose, Arka Chattopadhyay, Samrat Sengupta, Atindriya Chakraborty, Malini Bhattacharya, Supriya Chaudhuri, Partha Pratim Roy Chowdhury and Sourit Bhattacharya, these stories, poems and interviews include his first published story 'Bhashan' ('Immersion') as well as important late stories like 'American Petromax' or 'Nuclear Winter'. There are stories that directly engage with politics, such as 'Leopard-Man' and 'Scarecrow', and those that capture the political through indirect psychological questions of everyday, insignificant criminality as in 'Toy' or by way of a Kafkaesque parable in '4+1'. To represent Nabarun at his critical best, we also have a Fyataru story and the iconic poem, 'This Valley of Death Is Not My Country'. The themes of the poems and the stories range from early 1970s' state-violence on revolutionaries of the Naxalbari Movement to the crisis of Marxism under the rule of the democratic left, the aftermath of consumerism and the flow of neo-liberal capital, the shocking nature within the mundane, mysterious and occult practises in a postcolonial city, critique of war, nuclear fallout and many others. His literary forms include radical left revolutionary realist narratives as well as non-realist modes that have ghosts, flying humans or petrol-drinking whores in a dystopic, neo-liberal world order. These translations, we believe, will provide a solid entry point into Nabarun's charismatic imaginary for scholars interested in related fields. The essays include topics ranging from animality, language and resistance (Aritra Chakraborti), the animal and cosmic logic (Dibyakusum Ray), machine and biopolitics (Arka Chattopadhyay) and objects and commodities (Samrat Sengupta) to subaltern resistance and postcolonial politics (Anindya Sekhar Purakayastha), postcolonial city space (Anuparna Mukherjee), counter-history and counter-memory (Anustup Basu), Indian occult and radical aesthetics (Carola Erika Lorea), gendered violence (Priyanka Basu), toxic ecologies and eco-gothic (Sourit Bhattacharya) and adaptation of his work on stage and screen (Arnab Banerji). These essays, compiled with care and thought,

wish to not only bring Nabarun's engagement with diverse but significant local and world-historical topics to a wider public attention but also to situate and suggest his compelling world literary style and appeal.

As we pass through a difficult historical present when the economic logic of neoliberalism and the disturbing rise of fascism and authoritarianism attempt to regularly stifle the characteristically 'human' practice of critical thinking, and put humanities and humanistic work as a field of study and activism under serious threat, Nabarun's anti-establishment writings and his unstinting faith and lifelong work in empowering the marginal and the downtrodden through art remain a beacon of hope. At the same time, the rise of social movements on a global scale, based on class, caste, race, gender and ecology as well as about rising poverty, hunger, fundamentalism, corruption, unprecedented disparity in wealth possession and the dire effects of climate change remind us that people are relentlessly agitated against the current world order and have taken to the street to demand social justice. As we type the final words, we face the global repercussions of the Covid-19 outbreak. We fear not only about our own race and its survival against a series of viral outbreaks, but also of a socio-economically harsher world that awaits us. Along with this, we see images of cleaner cities and waters, of nature beginning to come back in an otherwise busy and non-natural urban life. Some of these materials and emotional contradictions at a simultaneously local and global scale permeate Nabarun's critical and creative imaginary. Never before, it seems to us, were Nabarun's writings and thoughts more timely and suggestive.

References

- Bhattacharya, Nabarun (2004 [1973]), 'Ei Mrityu Upatyaka Amar Desh Na'. In *Ei Mrityu Upatyaka Amar Desh Na*, 11–15. Kolkata: Saptarshi.
- Bhattacharya, Nabarun (2016), 'Bortoman Somoyer Bhabna'. In *Aro Kathabarta*, 107–114. Kolkata: Bhashabandhan.
- Chaudhuri, Supriya (2012), 'The Bengali Novel'. In *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Indian Culture*, edited by Vasudha Dalmia and Reshmi Sadana, 101–123. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Das, Dhananjay (2003), 'Sampadoker Nibedon'. In *Marxbaadi Sahitya Bitarka*, edited by Dhananjay Das, 8–12. Kolkata: Karuna Prakashani.

Part I

**Nabarun Bhattacharya's Works
in Translation**

Short Stories