Imagine a time some fifty or so years from now.

A young South Asian student of Indian writing in English embarks on a historical–literary project. She is going to write a new history of Indian English literature (provided the appeal of the new would still hold). Consulting histories of Indian English writing and other related sources on the subject produced by scholars belonging to earlier generations, the young researcher feels a little tickled to find such descriptions in discussions of Indian fiction in English as Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, the Scott of Bengal or R.K. Narayan, the Jane Austen of India etc. She sits back and tries to tease out what these comparisons imply. Should she also employ such comparisons in her chapter on the fiction (in English) by midnight’s grandchildren she has just started working on?

A gust of wind suddenly enters the young scholar’s study through the open window and ruffles the pages of her desk calendar, an antique thing one of her old eccentric professors had gifted her at the beginning of the year, claiming to have made it himself. Slightly distraught, she flips the pages back to the one for the current month. But for a moment she is taken up with the page for the month of August 2067: her eyes, as if under a magic spell, settle on the few red-lettered dates. From behind the blood-coloured dates, it seems to her, a long white passage (back to Mughal times?) peeps at her.¹ She feels saddened and proud at the same time. The trace of a smile then spreads over her young face: she has got her answer. No, those comparisons won’t do for her. She needs to construct other comparisons, those that don’t smack of the cultural hegemony of an erstwhile colonial power, though one of the South Asian nations, she has to admit, is fast becoming such a power.

With the initial quandary fixed, the young researcher is now faced with a different kind of dilemma. How would she go about discussing the many works (both creative and critical) Tabish Khair, one of midnight’s grandchildren, has left behind? She finally decides to say as little as possible about Tabish’s works of criticism; and although she has an intense liking for poetry, she concludes that she would bring in his poetry only to the extent to which it sheds critical light on his fiction.

The young scholar tries to remember which of Tabish’s works she had read first? Was it The Bus Stopped (2004) or Filming, a Love Story (2007)? Or was it How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position (2012)? She can’t decide; but it is his third novel, The Thing about Thugs (2010), she distinctly remembers, that she had enjoyed reading most. She would start her section on Tabish’s fiction with a critical review of this novel.

What are those things that the young researcher likes so much about The Thing about Thugs? They are many for sure. But the most engaging aspect of the work for her is its way of telling the

¹ On 14 and 15 August respectively, Independence Day (from Britain) is celebrated in Pakistan and India. 15 August is National Mourning Day in Bangladesh. The Mughals ruled (most of) India before the British colonisation of the subcontinent.
story, or rather, stories. It’s so gripping that she could not put the book aside when she first took it up for reading. However, that first impression, she feels, needs some rigorous explication before presenting it to the reader of her new history. Possibly the almost magical appeal of the narrative derives from the artistry with which Tabish brings together its different strands and thus gives his work a kind of tentative, open-ended closure.

Getting up from her desk, the young scholar goes to her kitchenette to get herself a hot mug of coffee, thinking all the while about how to give her readers at least an outline of the story or stories so that they can appreciate what she appreciates most about the novel. Back to work, she picks up the book and turns a few of the opening pages to give the memory of her first reading it a jolt. There’s a narrator, she remembers now, in ‘[his] grandfather’s library,’ diligently reading an odd assortment of books from ‘the Bröntes’ to ‘Mayhew’s voluminous accounts of the London poor ...’ (3). It is this narrator who tells one of the stories, the one in which characters such as John May and his accomplices Shields and the One-eyed Jack go about collecting human heads for ‘the great scientific project of M’lord [Lord Batterstone], his indelible contribution to the glory of his race and family name, his proposed Theatre of Phrenological Specimen’ (20). Is Tabish hinting at a parallel (and for the young researcher quite a natural thing to expect from a midnight’s grandchild) between the science of phrenology and the cult of thuggee? Why else would the next chapter be the opening page from the life account of a notorious but now ‘reformed thug’ (183) named Amir Ali?² Captain Meadows has recently brought Amir (won over to the path of light and reason) to London to counter those (including Lord Batterstone) in the London Society of Phrenology who hold that phrenology is an infallible guide to understanding human nature. The Captain thinks otherwise. Skull reading is deplorably inadequate when it comes to passing judgment on the moral character of a person. A man or woman is not born a criminal or a saint; it is circumstances that account for what he or she eventually becomes. Amir’s emancipation is a case in point.

All this talk about beheading, phrenology, thuggee etc. leaves the young scholar feeling a little distressed; so she decides to take a break. To divert herself, she switches on the television in the drawing room and is surprised to find that the selected channel is showing The Circle of Reason, a film based on Amitav Ghosh’s debut novel of the same title. For a moment she thinks of changing the channel; but the scene on the screen has already roused the critic in her: Balaram, a committed enthusiast of phrenology, is thumping a small tea table with his fist to lend force to his claim that phrenology is superior to such mainstream sciences as chemistry, nuclear physics etc., while his friend Gopal, with a confused expression on his face, slowly drinks his tea.

With the film over, the young researcher returns to her desk. So The Thing about Thugs invariably begs comparison with The Circle of Reason, she muses. She needs to spell out the similarities between the two works as well as the departures of the one from the other. As she keeps thinking about the issue, it occurs to her that in The Circle of Reason Amitav is much more concerned with how discourses are differentially ordered or situated, with some accorded more prestige than others (like criminology or phrenology) at a given time, an idea he possibly came across in the works of that once formidable French deconstructionist Michele Foucault (how out of fashion deconstruction appears these days as a critical practice!). On the other hand, Tabish inflects the discourse on phrenology not only with class but also with diversity (hence the undercurrent of tension between Lord Batterstone and the group he calls ‘the Combians’ and

² The initial hunch strengthens as the young researcher notes that both Amir and John May spend a considerable time in the ‘scullery’.
Captain Meadows’ ‘liberal position’ [20, 70]). The comparison enables the young scholar to consider the beheadings in The Thing about Thugs from a fresh perspective. It strikes her now that the victims in the service of phrenology are ‘the very dregs of society’ (207). Thingification is both a class and racial question. And it’s here – that is, in the terrain chalked out by capitalism and ‘the rough beast’ that it spawns in the form of colonialism/imperialism – where the metropolitan Thing and the colonial Thug intersect. Inadvertently the words ‘three cheers to capitalism’ escape from the mouth of the young researcher.

But it’s time, the young scholar feels, she talked about the other two strands in the narrative. In one of them, Amir ‘relat[es] the full account of [his] life’ (21) as an ‘ex-Thug’ (70) to Captain Meadows. The young researcher has no difficulty in seeing what Tabish is trying to achieve here. She is quite familiar with the once-in-vogue postcolonial practice famously defined by the most illustrious of its Indian champions as ‘writing back’. What impresses her is the way Amir impresses on the Captain that he is indeed ‘hear[ing] the account of a real Thug’ (21), while in one of his letters written in Persian and addressed to Jenny, his English beloved, Amir confesses: ‘[M]y dear, I was not, I am not what the Kaptaan [Captain] wants me to be – I am not Amir Ali, the Thug’ (26). So Amir tells Captain Meadows what the latter wants to hear from him. In that case, the actual author of Notes on a Thug: Character and Circumstances, the book the Captain is writing based on the stories told by Amir, is not the former but the latter. The subaltern can speak, can even appropriate a discourse/text to his own thuggish end (for the moment so thinks the young scholar)! In at least one sense then, Amir is a thug: the way he so smoothly succeeds in deceiving the Captain into believing his made-up story ‘embroidered’ with ‘lies’ (157), even though the Captain is guided by ‘Mighty Reason’ (23).

The third strand in the narrative woven of the Persian letters is actually intended to negate whatever Amir tells Captain Meadows, that is, the ‘official/public’ record of his life. Amir writes in his first letter to Jenny:

Scribbling away in the murk of the scullery, I wish, perhaps, to leave an account of myself in words other than the ones Kaptaan Meadows uses in his notebook. (26)

Tabish is thus coupling, the young scholar notes, the ‘writing back’ agenda with a revisionist/subaltern one (as had been conceptualised by the guru of the subaltern school of historiography, Ranajit Guha). As such, Amir’s letters are best read as a meta-text that works to upset the hierarchy of discourses by according the personal more significance than the public, a practice that used to be popular with the feminists of her grandmother’s generation.

‘Steady, dear, steady,’ the young researcher soliloquises. She feels a little embarrassed for letting herself be so taken up by the book she is reviewing. Is The Thing about Thugs a magic box of wonders? Does it have no blemishes at all? After all it is a work of fiction once crafted by a flesh-and-blood (male) person at a certain time and place. Hasn’t he left any trace of himself in it? Of course, he has; and to her chagrin the young scholar discovers that possibly Gayatri Spivak was not entirely mistaken in raising that resounding question: Can the subaltern speak? The subaltern speaks, but s/he does so (in all probability) in a borrowed tongue. For at times Amir betrays such refined sensibility and taste as well as perceptual sophistication that he becomes all too transparent; it is impossible for the reader not to see his university-educated creator/narrator through him (for a moment the shadow of a doubt crosses the young researcher’s mind: Is she judging the work at hand in a West-derived critical framework that attaches so much value to the criterion of ‘depersonalisation’ in art?). For example, after his release from prison Amir reminisces in a letter to Jenny:
You see, janaam, in those hours of imprisonment, a frightening thought crossed my mind. I felt that I had become my own story; my life had turned into the lie I had narrated to Captain Meadows. Suddenly, I was the thug I had claimed to be.

It felt strange to become something else. Is that all it requires? A few words, a few stories? Is our hold on reality so weak, so insecure? Can stories – told by yourself, told by others – turn us into something else? Why is it that, no matter how we grasp reality, no matter what reality we grasp, we need to don the glove of stories? Is that all we are: stories, words, breath? (177)

It is as if Tridib, a PhD researcher in archeology, is schooling the unnamed narrator in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* in the discursivity/narrativity of life – life acted/lived out as/in a story: ‘Everyone lives in a story ... because stories are all there are to live in, it [is] just a question of which one you choose.’

And there’s the rich dose of anachronism. In 1840 Amir sometimes measures road distance in ‘mile’ (21) and at other times in ‘kilometre’ (58), while Captain Meadows (pre-)echoes Marlow in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* by about six decades: ‘This too has been one of the dark places of the earth.’

The shops are pulling down shutters. The busy day is drawing to a close, with the western sky still retaining a little of the crimson tinge of the just set sun. Unawares, the young scholar too takes on the slightly pensive mood of the crawling evening. John May and his men have brutally killed Jenny for no apparent reason. Could it be that they had felt scared lest she went to law and order enforcing agencies to report on them and thus avenge herself on the murder of her aunt, the first victim to pay for the advancement of reason and science in the form of phrenology? However, two of the murderers are eventually apprehended, though what happened to John May is left a mystery. Lord Batterstone has boarded *Good Hope* on a voyage up the Congo, while Amir remains suspended between possibilities: to be on *Good Hope* or not to be.

In the concluding page of *The Thing about Thugs*, the narrator throws a rhetorical question to the reader: ‘Can my language claim to tell all of Amir Ali?’ (244). At the end of her review of the book, the young researcher finds herself asking a similar question. Can even an extensive review claim to convey to the reader the multilayered resonance of such a densely textured novel?

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4 Or is it the case that the twenty-first-century narrator in translating Amir’s Persian letters into English sees no problem in using ‘kilometre’ as a unit for measuring road distance?