Village Idyll?

The Blending of Work and *Otium* in Contemporary Indian Fiction on Rural Life

Melina Munz

The rural space in India has been the object of much research and discussion, figuring in an essentialist understanding of '*the* Indian village' both in colonial times and in the context of Independence as key to an understanding of cultural and economic structures in India. It continues to be a major research focus to this day, though predominantly from perspectives in ethnology and the social sciences rather than literature.[1] In contemporary Indian fiction in English, representations of rural life frequently continue to be positive and to form a contrast to life and work in cities like Delhi or Mumbai. The rural space is, however, not presented as pure idyll: life there is depicted as difficult and burdensome, but at the same time the protagonists from the villages come across as authentic and close to nature. I want to argue that this representation is based on the link or even conflation between certain necessary tasks of physical work[2] and the experience of a free space of *otium*. However, at the same time the rural space is used as a space of privilege for the outsider using it for recreation and thus – the exact opposite of the idea of a rustic idyll in which physical exertion and *otium* go hand in hand – as a contrast to work routines of everyday life.

---

[1] An entire panel at the ECSAS 2018 was focussing on "Who Speaks for the Village? Representations of the 'Rural' in India from the focusing to the Post-Colonial Era", with perspectives predominantly from Economy and Law, History and Political Science; cf. Manish Thakur, *Indian Village. A Conceptual History*, Jaipur et.al. 2014.

[2] I am using the term "work" rather than "labour" to highlight that I am focusing on the social practice of certain kinds of work as well as its experience and representation. "Labour" is used in many theoretical studies either to denote a more abstract (philosophical or political) concept or workforce as a commodity rather than the concrete experience of certain kinds of work. Cf. Rahel Jaeggi, *Alienation*, transl. Frederick Neuhouser/Alan E. Smith, New York 2014, 11–15; August Carbonella/Sharryn Kasmir, "Introduction. Toward a Global Anthropology of Labor", in: August Carbonella/Sharryn Kasmir (eds.), *Blood and Fire. Toward a Global Anthropology of Labor*, New York/Oxford 2014, 1–29, 7; Mark Hearn/Grant Michelson, "Going to a New Place. Rethinking Work in the 21st Century", in: Mark Hearn/Grant Michelson (eds.), *Rethinking Work. Time, Space and Discourse*, Cambridge 2006, 1–15, 2, 6, 11.

It will be necessary in the course of this article to analyse the narrative strategies with which work and *otium* are connected as well as to interpret the implications of the narrative perspective that evokes this connection. An important question will be whether the experience of *otium* in the context of necessary work is part of a privileged, metropolitan outside perspective on the difficult realities of rural life enabling *otium* for the observer.

Because positive representations of the village and the hills in India have a long history, it is impossible to naively talk about 'the village community' and 'the hills'. So, after initial examples from Sohaila Abdulali's *The Madwoman of Jogare* (1998), Anuradha Roy's *The Folded Earth* (2011) and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), it will be necessary to shortly summarize the cultural imaginary of villages as 'the authentic India' and the Himalayas as an idyllic space in order to take account of the discourses of the rural space in India that could still influence its current representation. An excursion on these discourses will also reflect on the fact that the space these novels are set in is presented equally with recourse to characteristics and topoi of the village, while the described areas can vary in size from actual villages to larger towns.

The concept of *otium* can be defined as a deeper mode of experiencing linked to, but not identical with, terms like repose and meditation, flow or immersion. In both very active and relatively passive situations, it refers to an experience that can neither be produced intentionally, nor is it ever a means for some other objective. At the same time it can be very creative or productive.[3] Rather than having a specific time and place allocated, a sense of timelessness and an intense perception of space is integral to experiences of *otium*.[4] It is a concept that can help to adequately describe situations in which the boundaries between leisure and work are blurred; that is, if a character experiences a positive sense of freedom that cannot be set apart in a separate sphere of leisure or free time.[5] Thus, in the following examples markers such as peacefulness, relaxation or inner freedom will be important particularly when one kind of work is juxtaposed with another (for instance seasonal peasant work vs. exploitative contract work; cooking in the village on an open hearth vs. illegal immigrant's jobs or cow-herding vs. governmental bureaucracy). I will draw on the concept of alienation to discuss with what characteristics work in the rural space is described in these novels so that it can be presented to the reader as more open to include experiences of *otium* as well as – through the inclusion of *otium* in the sphere of work – to express a utopian potential of unalienated forms of work.

---

[3] Cf. Monika Fludernik/Miriam Nandi, "Introduction", in: Monika Fludernik/Miriam Nandi (eds.), *Idleness, Indolence and Leisure in English Literature*, Basingstoke et al. 2014, 1–16; Jochen Gimmel/Tobias Keiling, *Konzepte der Muße*, Tübingen 2016, 4.

[4] Gimmel/Keiling, *Konzepte der Muße*, 6 f.

[5] Gimmel/Keiling, *Konzepte der Muße*, 3 f., 11 f., 61–66; Fludernik/Nandi, "Introduction", 1–16.

1. Work and Otium in Indian Village Novels: Three Examples

The positive view of rural life in the novels I am going to discuss is often linked to descriptions of villagers, peasants and indigenous (Adivasi) peoples living in tune with the seasons and being daily occupied with tasks necessary for survival. While busy with physical work, they are presented by the respective narrators as part of an impressive natural scenery. Through these descriptions the novels suggest that either the villagers themselves, or some kind of observer discovers a calmness and peace – a sense of freedom despite the focus on necessary work – that could be seen as an experience of *otium*. Thus the blending of work and *otium* in these novels is linked to the representation of supposedly authentic Indian village life.

Sohaila Abdulali's *The Madwoman of Jogare* focuses both on the daily lives of the local population, mostly Adivasis, and the natural surroundings of the river valley the novel is set in. However, it does so not from the perspective of an Adivasi narrator, but from variable internal focalization giving insight into the thoughts and feelings of a set of Indian (also urban Indian) and European characters living in the valley and being part of or linked to an organisation for Tribal Upliftment. The novel is structured along the changes of season that shape the lives of the protagonists: After all, the madwoman of the title only appears in two or three passages, but frames the temporal stretch of the novel as she predicts the coming monsoon with her wild dance through the valley. Her dance at the beginning and her death and potential replacement at the end mark the passage of a little more than one year.[6] Moreover, her appearance is so important that all work ceases once rumour spreads of her coming so that the workers can watch her dance.[7] This reaction of workers in the area emphasises that although they have to fulfil their respective tasks, their work is not tied to a strict daily time regime, but they are free to pause for an event that they think of as relevant.

Whenever Adivasis appear in the novel, they are at some kind of work and even though the reader does not get their internal perspective, they are often suggested to be content if either the conditions for their work's success are ideal or as part of a natural beauty surrounding them and seemingly inspiring their work, as in the twilight-time of *Gaudhuli*, a term marking both the smell, light and colours and the time when rice has to be picked "at exactly the right moment".[8] A particularly striking passage is the description of the village people's work and their beautiful natural surroundings on

---

[6] Cf. Sohaila Abdulali, *The Madwoman of Jogare : A novel*, New Delhi 1998, 183, 205, 216 f.

[7] Cf. Abdulali, *The Madwoman of Jogare*, 5.

[8] Abdulali, *The Madwoman of Jogare*, 68.

January afternoons in the valley. Warm sunshine without the sting and sweat of May or October. […] *Loads of hay* like fantastic avant-garde hairstyles atop the *thin men carrying them* carefully across the valley. *Adivasis making mud bricks* next to gurgling ponds on the river bank; pressing dark brown earth into a mould, a brick at a time, *whole families camped out*, *standing in mud pits*, *and the growing piles lit aflame for weeks until the bricks are ready to make a house*. And the sounds, the sounds of a January afternoon. Far-off hollow call of a monkey. Teak leaves, stiffened by the heat of the previous months, crackling crisply in the breeze. The merry whistle of a *young man in a bullock-cart*, king of the road, lounging as the cart finds its way home. Cartwheel of wood clattering across hard dry rock […].[9]

Although the impression of the valley is also about the scenery and its sensual perception, it is striking how different kinds of manual labour are listed almost like a tableau of typical work for a January afternoon. Everything is observed synchronously and this picture-like view heightens the effect of harmony. Moreover, the lush description seems to express the observer's peacefulness and special experience, also because the elaborate description contrasts with the usual style of the novel otherwise focused on dialogue and shorter sentences.

Similar situations can be found in Anuradha Roy's *The Folded Earth* in the hill village Ranikhet, here focused on the characterisation of one character, the village girl Charu. Already from the beginning she is described as untamed and free-spirited:

She would forget to comb her hair till late in the day, letting it hang down her shoulders in two dishevelled plaits. […] She wore hand-me-down salwar kameezes too big for her […] All the same, she exuded the reserve and beauty of a princess of Nepal – even if it took her only a second to slide back into the awkward teenager I knew.[10]

The girl often has to go cow herding and goat herding, on several occasions the reason why she misses school. And yet the work is described as a fulfilling kind of work during which she "hummed a tune" and enjoyed the "December sun".[11] She even uses the work of grazing the goats as an excuse to go to a wild desolate spot by a river where she soon regularly meets her first love – about whom she makes the cows her only confidantes. At the small pickling factory of Ranikhet, the main protagonist and Charu's teacher reflects that she is "one of our best workers […]. She was so good at solving problems and so decisive that when I saw her at work, I often wondered why she had been such a disappointment at school".[12] The everyday tasks of the villagers are contrasted with the narrow-minded bureaucracy of the newly-arrived government official Chauhan: "Throughout his working life, Mr. Chauhan had despaired over the lack of discipline, civic sense and hard work among his fellow citizens, but what he saw around him in the hill

[9] Abdulali, *The Madwoman of Jogare*, 138.
[10] Anuradha Roy, *The Folded Earth*, London 2011, 4.
[11] Roy, *The Folded Earth*, 32.
[12] Roy, *The Folded Earth*, 39.

country beat everything".[13] Through his different expectation for what counts as "disciplined work", the villagers' routine is not even registered as work at all: "It was as if people were on holiday all the time".[14] Work is omnipresent, but its rhythm not registered as work at all by the outsider expecting clear working hours, who ironically calls it free time, which the villagers do not really have. With his sense of discipline, he opens battle against grazing of cows on certain banned meadows and severely disrupts the work routine of the villagers.

In Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, the village ideal is founded again on a contrast, this time with the horrible immigrant experience the character Biju goes through in New York. His experience of being exploited, working long hours for no salary or only the possibility to sleep on a table in the kitchen where he chops vegetables during the day, makes him remember the rhythm of village life with a sense of nostalgia: "How good the roti tastes here! It is because the *atta* is ground by hand, not by machine…and because it is made on a *choolah*, better than anything cooked on a gas or kerosene stove… Fresh roti, fresh butter, fresh milk still warm from the buffalo…".[15] The illegal immigrant perceives the accelerated modernity of New York as a negative contrast to the slower, or even seemingly timeless, space of his home village, a contrast Miriam Nandi has emphasised in her article on Hartmut Rosa's theory of acceleration in relation to Desai's novel. Nandi applies Rosa's concept of acceleration in a globalised context and links it with colonial, orientalist stereotypes of the lazy native. Because "modernity and its accelerated mode of production and lifestyle emerged in the largest part through the colonial exploitation of the South", Nandi proposes a globalised perspective on acceleration.[16] The reality of immigrant life is shaped by the continuous changing of occupation or places to stay in a fast-paced cyclical movement.[17] In each job Biju has to go through the action of procuring food for wealthier New Yorkers eating out while he is acutely aware that he cannot take part in that leisure practice.[18] In that sense "Biju can indeed", through neo-colonial mechanisms of exploitation, "be viewed as an accelerated figure in Hartmut Rosa's sense".[19] Biju's memories of his village as well as the everyday life of the other characters living in Kalimpong (Darjeeling) form a contrast of "rural slowness" to the "hyper-accelerated urban space" of New York.[20] In contrast to

---

[13] Roy, *The Folded Earth*, 67.
[14] Roy, *The Folded Earth*, 67.
[15] Kiran Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, London/New York 2006, 103.
[16] Miriam Nandi (in press), "'Idle Poor and Lazy Natives?' – Re-Writing Stereotypes about the Global Poor", in: Barbara Schmidt-Haberkamp/Verena Jain-Warden (eds.), *Representing Poverty*, Bonn, n.p.
[17] Cf. Nandi, "'Idle Poor and Lazy Natives?'", n.p.
[18] Cf. Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, 51, 53, 135; "'Idle Poor and Lazy Natives?'", n.p.
[19] Nandi, "'Idle Poor and Lazy Natives?'", n.p.
[20] Nandi, "'Idle Poor and Lazy Natives?'", n.p.

Biju's memories of India, time in New York seems to him primarily as a resource for either work, searching for new work or searching for a place to stay and the pace with which it passes seems to be dictated rather than organised by his own choice and agency.[21] Despite political unrest and hardship, the novel ends with the sense that the 'timelessness' or 'pastness' of rural spaces is to be preferred to being on the run in modern, progressive New York. Although "[p]overty is not idyllic in her Indian setting", there is at least enough time for leisure and idleness in the rhythms of everyday life.[22] The novel thus has a "critical, subversive potential" also because it self-consciously refers to a tradition of portraying the village as timeless or even quoting the colonial cliché of India being stuck in an earlier phase of history or civilisation, depicting the clash or irreconcilability of two time regimes.[23] It does so with reference to a global situation, using this setup to critique the exploitative work practices of the modern, western city-space.

In the three examples analysed so far, work in a village context is through different textual strategies always linked with characteristics of authentic village life. In *The Madwoman of Jogare*, descriptions of agricultural work are interwoven with the beauty of the natural surroundings in which it takes place and there are several descriptions that emphasise the indigenous people's closeness to natural rhythms. In *The Folded Earth*, the innocent, untamed Charu stands for pastoral work that, while being defined by its own routines, knows no time schedules and is therefore characterised as sheer laziness by the urban bureaucrat. Finally, *The Inheritance of Loss* contains flashbacks to fond village memories from the perspective of present exploitation in the accelerated, Western metropolitan space. In all three novels, authentic village life is represented through the perception of its natural surroundings with all the senses as well as through certain temporal structures and routines dependent on seasonal changes and the affordances of in the largest sense agricultural work (harvesting, herding of animals, processing crops).

2. Village Ideal and Hill Imaginary

Before continuing the analysis of work and *otium* in the novels, a short excursion on two aspects of the discourses surrounding the rural space in India will be necessary. There has been throughout British rule in India a certain model image of the Indian village, which, through its "set of normative-ideological connotations for both the colonisers and the colonised", still continued to influence the village ideal of the national movement.[24] Village society was often seen as a "sig-

[21] Cf. Hearn/Michelson, "Going to an New Place", 5.
[22] Nandi, "'Idle Poor and Lazy Natives?'", n.p.
[23] Nandi, "'Idle Poor and Lazy Natives?'", n.p.
[24] Thakur, *Indian Village*, 3.

nifier of authentic native life, a social and cultural unit uncorrupted by outside influence".[25] This notion of authenticity was used, both from the colonisers' perspective and the leaders of the national movement, to construct an essentialised view on India as "a land of villages".[26] So there was, on the one hand "the characteristic colonial stereotype of the unchanging Indian village republic", useful for orientalists like Henry Maine, Baden-Powell and Sir Charles Metcalfe to describe India as ancient and backward because its archaic rural society was seen as "the antithesis of modern and progressive", not to forget urban, Britain.[27] The logic of this perspective even fixes India as stuck in an early stage of European civilisation.

On the other hand, the intelligentsia of the national movement, first and foremost Gandhi and Nehru, described their idea of the Indian village with surprisingly similar characteristics of static timelessness, seeing it as the "civilizational essence and […] the primary repository of the real and authentic India".[28] Of course, they were looking for a perspective from which "India could be represented as a single cultural and political entity, on the basis of which they could imagine nationhood for India".[29] Gandhi first contrasted the supposedly pure and authentic villages as the 'real' India with cities as a sign of Western colonial domination and degeneration, a tradition of seeing and describing the village that often still shapes arguments down to the present day. It continues to have an impact through literary classics like Raja Rao's village novel *Kanthapura* (1938). Through its immediate oral storytelling, the religious everyday practices and beliefs of the villagers, their gossip and their hierarchies, the novel ostentatiously (albeit not without irony) presents itself as an authentic depiction of village life.[30] The "'villageism' or 'villagisation'" that started in the 19th century is continuing in a "perennial nostalgia for the Indian village" that is also reflected in the popularity of sociological and anthropological studies on the village in India.[31] Moreover, the temporal prejudice towards a construct of the village is also apparent in the implications of the widespread rural development schemes: what needs to be developed is stuck in the past in contrast to other places that have already made it to the future.[32]

A stark contrast to 'villageism' is the approach to aspects of rural life in the context of postcolonial theory. The Subaltern Studies group formulates a funda-

---

[25] Surinder S. Jodhka, "Nation and Village. Images of Rural India in Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar", in: *Nation and Village* 37,32 (2002), 3343–3353.

[26] Jodhka, "Nation and Village", 3343, 3345; Thakur, *Indian Village*, 1 ff., 6.

[27] Rumina Sethi, *Myths of the nation. National identity and literary representation*, Oxford et.al. 1999, 23; Thakur, *Indian Village*, 3 f., 15–72.

[28] Thakur, *Indian Village*, 3 f., 73–90.

[29] Jodhka, "Nation and Village", 3345.

[30] Cf. Raja Rao, *Kanthapura*, 2nd ed., Oxford 1989.

[31] Thakur, *Indian Village*, 1 f., 6 f.

[32] Cf. Thakur, *Indian Village*, 158.

mental critique of any artistic or academic practice that purports to "speak for", for instance, female peasants, while really speaking for a constructed homogeneous group in relation to the self. In her seminal essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, Gayatri Spivak thus stresses heterogeneity above a static unity or essence of the peasantry or other subaltern groups.[33]

The second spatial area which can hardly be mentioned without also taking into account the way in which it has been imagined, are the Himalayas, including villages in the higher altitudes close to former hill stations of the Raj. The hill stations are significant in the way they contributed to how the hills are imagined in India until today as well as, very concretely, to their popularity as travel destinations. For the hill imagination, the most important aspect is the wish to set the hills apart from the plains, "to isolate their seasonal residents from India's harsher features, to offer them a comforting haven for rest and recreation".[34] For the English, they provided an escape from their dealings with Indians and a place to recreate a nostalgic mirror image of European architecture.

During colonial times, the hill people already inhabiting the locations of British hill stations have been described by their British seasonal residents in accordance with the idyllic location with the terminology of the noble savage.[35] Thus, to set them off from Indian societies of the plains, hill communities in completely different parts of the Himalayas were described with surprisingly similar traits, including "rustic simplicity", increased physical and mental energy, moral innocence, peacefulness and gentleness, a "rare bond with nature" and pastoral work.[36] This identification of people of hill communities with these traits are a case of Edward Said's concept of latent orientalism, often combining folkloristic interest with the description of a noble attractiveness reminiscent of the beauty of antique statues.[37]

In the second half of the nineteenth century the hill stations reached their peak in prestige and popularity, and they also became attractive to the Indian elites. From the turn of the century, they gradually lost their importance to the British and developed into popular holiday resorts for the Indian middle classes. They, too, came to seek recovery from life in the plains as well as the wonders of

---

[33] Cf. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", in: Cary Nelson/Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Urbana 1988, 271–316, 283, 285, 287, 289, 294, 296–302, 306 f.

[34] Dane Keith Kennedy, *The Magic Mountains. Hill Stations and the British Raj*, Berkeley, Calif. et.al. 1996, 2 f.

[35] Cf. Monika Fludernik, "Der 'Edle Wilde' als Kehrseite des Kulturprogressivismus", in: Monika Fludernik (ed.), *Der Alteritätsdiskurs des edlen Wilden* (Identitäten und Alteritäten), Würzburg 2002, 157–176; Kennedy, *The Magic Mountains*, 64 f., 87.

[36] Kennedy, *The Magic Mountains*, 64 ff., 68 f., 87.

[37] Cf. Kennedy, *The Magic Mountains*, 87, 227; Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, London et. al. 1995.

nature to be seen.[38] With examples like Anita Desai or Rudyard Kipling's *Plain Tales from the Hills* there is a whole literary tradition referring to or commenting on the hill imaginary.

I am arguing in this context that the village ideal (and, in the context of mountainous landscapes, the hill imaginary) is so strong in shaping the discourse of the rural space in India that it influences it even if the focus is not, strictly speaking, on a village. This is the case here with *The Inheritance of Loss*, in which the only real villages appear in the memories of the judge Jemubhai and the cook's son Biju. Kalimpong, the main setting of the novel, is actually a town with almost 50.000 inhabitants, but still the choice of characters, the recurring description of its impressive natural surroundings and the contrast with the New York experience make it seem as if there were only a handful of different groups spread across the hillsides. There is a similar effect in *The Madwoman of Jogare*, in which the descriptions of the river valley, its village and its Adivasi population are reminiscent of the hill imaginary, even though the novel is set in Maharashtra, almost 1000 miles away from the Himalayas. Without wanting to stretch these influences too far, they still function as cultural images that structure how the village is perceived and are thus important for the representation of the rural space as authentic as well as for the role of work in this context.

3. The Hills as Space of Privilege and Rural India as Holiday Resort

In accordance with the "hill imaginary" described above, other groups apart from villagers and Adivasis appear in the novels' villages for various reasons. The practice of fleeing the greatest heat with a trip to the hills before the monsoon makes city life bearable again is clearly a contrast to the "authentic" life in the villages. This leisure or holiday practice of a trip "to the hills" (the kind of imaginary is similar when in *The Madwoman of Jogare* holiday bungalows are built in the hilly Maharashtra river valley) is clearly set apart from everyday working life.

As John Urry described in his work on *The Tourist Gaze*, while everyday practices like supposedly typical forms of work are of great interest to the tourist, the touristic experience is opposed to her own everyday working life at home.[39] Ironically, the visit to the village space to escape one's space of work further emphasises how the life of local inhabitants is structured by work. What Urry described in the context of European tourism could be applied to the hard farming work in the novels relevant in this context: "Almost any sort of work, even the

[38] Cf. Kennedy, *The Magic Mountains*, 212 f., 221.

[39] Cf. Jonas Larsen/John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*, 3rd ed., Los Angeles et al. 2011, 4, 10 f.

backbreaking toil of the Welsh miner or the unenviable work of those employed in the Parisian sewer, can be the object of the tourist gaze", so that the return to the workplace of others is part of the "alienated leisure" of the tourist.[40] Part of a trip to rural parts is the attraction of the supposedly idyllic authenticity of its inhabitants. This quest for authenticity makes the touristic observer see the various aspects of rural India as signs of themselves rather than as real objects and practices that are part of the local population's lives.[41] Moreover, the separation into visitor and rural population also implies a class distinction: their poverty is part of the authenticity of peasants or Adivasis in the novels, whereas regular holidays or trips to the hills can only be afforded (financially and temporally) by the middle classes. This inequality is also based on im/mobility: the mobility of the tourist presupposes the immobility of the local population that becomes the object of her gaze.[42]

However, in the logic of the novels there is an additional layer, as the tourist serves to emphasise the authenticity of the rural space. The particular rural time regime is thrown into relief by touristic practices: The touristic visitor contrasts with the idea of timelessness as she is only temporally present and the separation of work and leisure implicit in the touristic practice has a different temporal structure than a life defined by work with the rhythm of the seasons.[43] Therefore the perception of work in the novels as something that structures everyday life throughout the years is further underlined the tourist searching for difference emphasises the supposed timelessness of rural places because of its relevance for *her* leisure.[44]

When in *The Madwoman of Jogare* a recreation centre is being planned in the so far agricultural valley, it is because the building company's junior boss Arun sees the financial potential of building cottages for holiday-makers from Bombay: "the market demand for green places is strong".[45] The builders are proponents of the village ideal as well, but as a sales strategy: "It is such a peaceful place here, village India, no pollution…".[46] Arun's plans entail building a road, cutting down parts of the jungle, subdividing plots; all developments perceived by the artist Ifrat who lives in the valley as "geography being stripped away slice by slice".[47]

---

[40] Larsen/Urry, *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*, 10 f.
[41] Cf. Larsen/Urry, *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*, 4, 16 f.
[42] Cf. Larsen/Urry, *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*, 29.
[43] Cf. Larsen/Urry, *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*, 3 f.
[44] Cf. Larsen/Urry, *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*, 4 f.
[45] Abdulali, *The Madwoman of Jogare*, 53.
[46] Abdulali, *The Madwoman of Jogare*, 26.
[47] Abdulali, *The Madwoman of Jogare*, 118.

In this sense the link between work and leisure is important, because the concept of the separate leisure of a holiday as well as business possibilities is shown to ruin parts of the valley. According to Ifrat "[t]he only people who really belong here are the Adivasis", who live from and with the land.[48] Ultimately, the novel thus discusses questions of ownership and changes to old rural communities. The passages about the holiday centre are part of a discourse on claims to the land, and they show whose voices are being heard. The coming exploitation of the land through the leisure industry disrupts the usual cycle of work and the villagers' lives for the promise that "there would be jobs, there would be lots and lots of money".[49] The villagers work is replaced by one that could not be associated with *otium* by any means, "[t]he contractors soon hired villagers to build a road through the jungle […]. Nineteen rupees a day, fourteen for women", but the workers risk hurting themselves and may lose their houses if they block the new road.[50] With bitter sarcasm, the narrator mockingly addresses the future upper middle-class tourist: "The land is saved now, memsahib, so that the remaining leopards and giant squirrels are safe for you to see them. Your bungalow is where Ganpat and the other men played cards in the shade, and Ganpat is in Bombay begging outside the Taj Mahal hotel […] it is a National Park with Luxury Bungalows, and you must enjoy it, memsahib, but be careful, don't touch these walls, because there is salt red sweat blood in the paint".[51] Similarly to the immigrant experience in *The Inheritance of Loss*, it becomes clear that the kind of work that enables an experience of *otium* is not one linked to capitalist profit-making.

The *Inheritance of Loss* has a similarly sceptical perspective on the touristic view of the mountains in Darjeeling. A Scotsman coming to the hills for the first time imagines his building a house on an exposed hillside with a splendid view as a heroic undertaking: "His true spirit had called to him, then, informed him that it, too, was wild and brave, and refused to be denied the right to adventure".[52] However, others had "paid the price for such romance" and the beauties of the landscape are less accessible to the poor native workers, whose "faces [are] being bent slowly to look always at the ground" while carrying building material "up to this site chosen for a view that could raise the human heart to spiritual heights".[53] The spatial semantics here are clearly divided into the "heights" associated with sublimity, heaven and spirituality, which belong to the employer and profiteer of physical work, and "the ground" below as the domain of the workers. Furthermore, the novel continuously refers to the problematic aspect of the appropriation of a landscape and its consequences, be it the dying out of whole

[48] Abdulali, *The Madwoman of Jogare*, 129.
[49] Abdulali, *The Madwoman of Jogare*, 147.
[50] Abdulali, *The Madwoman of Jogare*, 147 f.
[51] Abdulali, *The Madwoman of Jogare*, 148.
[52] Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, 12.
[53] Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, 12.

animal species, landslides caused by a new law allowing an additional storey to be built on new houses, or simply the utter dependence of the local economy on tea, timber and tourism. These are shown to be the effects of the possessiveness of touristic voyeurism.

The holiday perspective on the hills is also briefly mentioned in *The Folded Earth* as a short period when foreigners appear in Ranikhet and "the town is crowded with people who come up from the plains to escape the heat. They are everywhere for a few weeks: tourists, summer residents, day trippers".[54] It is particularly noteworthy that only one page deals with the phenomenon, as it is merely a short interruption in the cyclical routine of a year in Ranikhet. Again, the seasonal visit and escape from the work space in the plains contrast with the fact that the villagers never leave Ranikhet, spending both work and leisure in one place: "Here is where the sky begins and ends, and if there are other places, they have skies different from our sky", as the teacher reflects in another passage.[55] Also similarly to *The Madwoman of Jogare*, the village life deteriorates through forced supposed "improvement" measures from outside through government representatives and Hindu chauvinist party politics. The initiated by official Chauhan wants to improve the power and water supply, chops down trees and deprives eagles of their nesting sites for "a log cabin for the entertainment of bureaucrats" and plans a new road system, intending to make Ranikhet "the Switzerland of India".[56] More roads being built by Adivasi workforce and because of them, the pastoral work standing almost metonymically for everyday routines of the villagers is further inhibited and more meadows are banned for grazing.

For the representations of the villages as idyllic and authentic, influences from the outside fulfil two functions in the three novels mentioned so far: First, they reinforce the impression of a harmonious rhythm of life and work in the villages through the contrast of seeing the same space as one purely for leisure in the form of a holiday from work. Second, they emphasise the positive character of work shaped by necessity, the natural surroundings, flexible time regimes according to need and season, and sociability – contrasting it with exploitative work to a strict time regime for the profit of a few and irrespective of the harm it does to its surroundings.

Thus, what is at stake in the characterisation of work in the novels is frequently the contrast between two separate concepts of work. One seems to provide some kind of identification – Charu is shown to be able to relate to her task of herding cows as well as to herself being engaged in that task. The other understanding of work with its emphasis on discipline, tight time schedules and a focus

[54] Roy, *The Folded Earth*, 127.
[55] Roy, *The Folded Earth*, 16.
[56] Roy, *The Folded Earth*, 178, 223.

on wage rather than the product of work is presented as *alienated* work that has to be done for someone else without making any inherent motivation possible.

Rahel Jaeggi defines the concept of alienation as a failed appropriation of the world, or as referring to "relations that are not entered into for their own sake, as well as activities with which one cannot 'identify'".[57] Clearly Biju cannot relate to his manic working life in New York and in both cases of road works the local workers know they partially destroy their natural environment but have no choice other than to take the jobs.

As one characteristic of experiences of *otium* is a sense of freedom, the "powerlessness and […] lack of freedom" in alienated world relations are its exact opposite.[58] Particularly in Marx' definition, alienated world relations mean instrumental world relations, seeing one's tasks "not as ends but only as means. In the same way one regards the capacities one acquires from or brings to the activity – and therefore also oneself – as means rather than ends."[59] A characteristic feature of experiences of *otium*, however, is that actions are taken for their own sake, hence the increased potential for identifying with them.[60] Moreover, the emphasis on the authentic, harmonious connection to the characters' natural surroundings during unalienated work in the novels seem to stress that "the relation to self and world" is still intact.[61] The contrastive work descriptions running through the novels seem to show with the help of the characteristics of unalienated work the distinctive quality of work in which *otium* is possible.

4. Aspects of Representation

The literary depiction of a scene linking *otium* and work is of course a strongly mediated representation of rural life. Especially with reference to the background of hill and village discourses in India, it is important to question whether the link between work and *otium* is part of the protagonists' perception or of the construction of a certain view of rural life in the hills.

Especially in Sohaila Abdulali's novel, the close affinity between the work of the valley people and an experience of *otium* is part of a certain representation. The descriptive passages about work are among the most poetic in the novel, focussing on the perception of the valley through the senses by listing a wealth of focusing and adjectives, using alliteration as well as similes:

---

[57] Jaeggi, *Alienation*, 4.
[58] Jaeggi, *Alienation*, 6.
[59] Jaeggi, *Alienation*, 13.
[60] Cf. Gimmel/Keiling, *Konzepte der Muße*, 66 ff.
[61] Jaeggi, *Alienation*, 6.

*F*lame-of-the-*f*orest *f*lowering orange *f*leshy blooms against the blue sky. *Odd*, beautiful, tiny *f*lowers of purple, yellow, pink, bursting out of the cracks in the dry brown fields, *Loads of hay* like *fantastic avant-garde hairstyles* atop the thin men *car*rying them *care*fully across the valley.[62]

Although the narrative perspective is not clearly internally focalized here, the stylistic devices and similes evoking modernist art imply a certain bias. Through them, the passage does not seem to express the experience of the Adivasis themselves of whom the reader learns neither names nor other characteristics, but rather of the Indian artist Ifrat and her English friend lazing in the afternoon sun and observing the described view.

Fittingly, the passage continues with her speaking "'I like January,' mumbled Ifrat a few minutes later, flexing her toes happily"; suggesting that the reflection on the valley was part of her meditative pause in the minutes that elapsed. The impression of the valley as picturesque view is reinforced when she comments, despite all the work observable in January, that "[i]t's such a nice time of year; there's not too much work to do, and people are generally in a good mood".[63] Either she assumes that the overall January mood encompasses the workers. Or it is, in contrast to Charu in *The Folded Earth*, not necessarily the Adivasis themselves who experience *otium* during their tasks, but the onlookers for whom the peasant workers merge with the natural landscape to form a picturesque tableau.

The artist as onlooker is, of course, mirrored in the fact that all of this is described in a novel and the narrative voice presents another artistic perspective. To connect this to the touristic aspects of the previous section, Urry's "tourist gaze" which takes everything as a sign of itself is, in a way, doubled in the novels. On the one hand, there are people visiting from outside, but on the other hand the tourist gaze also lies in the narrator as observer. The selective and possessive view of the tourist on nature is clearly aesthetically predetermined by cultural images of the picturesque and the framed view of a landscape.[64]

The artist's perspective on the rural population is emphasised in the novel through the painter Ifrat, who is madly in love with the rural landscape of the river valley she comes from and likes to see villagers at work as perfect motives of her paintings: "Intense pink ribbon, neon paddy green squares, young polished brown skin held in a certain posture, straight and fluid in the shimmering light, a certain quality of light on a young girl walking…" or, in another passage in her studio: "She daubed a little Ultramarine onto her painting of bullock carts clattering across the river in the moonlight […] Should there be an old woman swaying in the back of the last cart?".[65] In that sense, the hard work and close af-

---

[62] Abdulali, *The Madwoman of Jogare*, 138 [emphasis mine].
[63] Abdulali, *The Madwoman of Jogare*, 138.
[64] Cf. Larsen/Urry, *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*, 110, 113.
[65] Abdulali, *The Madwoman of Jogare*, 108 f.

finity with the native soil of others are a source for *her* moments of *otium* when she is painting in her studio.

One could argue in the context of this novel that these connections are part of a discourse the text as a whole draws attention to: the choice of focusing on the perspective of those who only recently came to the valley (in the last 30 years in Ifrat and her family's case) repeatedly points to the difficulty of living respectfully with the older Adivasi population; a difficulty faced daily by the staff of the Tribal Upliftment centre and that is represented in the conflict with exploitative urban businessmen. However, the narrative situation in Abdulali's as well as Roy's novel in the context of their representation of the village space is reminiscent of Gayatri Spivak's essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* and the highly problematic practice of *speaking about* or even *for* the subaltern from a privileged and, in this context, even spatially removed position. While Spivak does not deny the possibility of a deconstructive analysis of the mechanisms that silence the subaltern voice, such as "the epistemic violence of imperialism and the international division of labor" as well as a digging up of acts (rather than statements) of subversive resistance, the representation of the rural space by a privileged, metropolitan voice for a privileged, metropolitan audience does not allow much room for these.[66] Consequently, the literary analysis of the relation between *otium* and idyllic representations of work in the rural space needs to draw attention to the privilege inherent in creating this link as well as in expressing the experience of *otium*.

What these novels have in common is that their representations of the rural space invariably contain, in spite of their discursive baggage, a utopian potential of unalienated work. This is most apparent in the relations between the narrator and the idyllic object s/he represents: in one instance, the rural space is the peaceful and beautiful vision of a painter and in another the innocent, unruly village girl repeatedly functions like a spark of hope for the grieving and depressive narrator. The situation in *The Inheritance of Loss* is different, since at least in the passages focusing on New York the poor immigrant worker himself narrates his experiences. But even there the perspective on the rural space as idyll is distorted, because he looks back on his childhood with a feeling of nostalgic memory. From the perspective of current exploitation in the Western capitalist city space, life rhythms in his village become an ideal to which he would like to return.

To sum up, the representation of authentic village life in these novels is often based on the nexus of work and *otium*. The most important factors of the kind of work during which an experience of *otium* is described to be possible are the time regime that defines work as well as, above all, the possibility to relate to the task at hand. Thus, the ideal of authentic village life presented in the novels is tied to

[66] Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", 289, 308.

a strong concept of work that is unalienated. However, despite this utopian element in rural forms of work, the positive characterisation of work is frequently created from an outside perspective, so that a privileged narrative perspective represents the way in which work is experienced by the villagers. This narrative situation does not only reinforce the presence of a long tradition of representing the village as essentialist idyll. It also links the aspects discussed here to the wider discussion about whether it is possible for subaltern, underprivileged groups to have a voice in a discourse dominated by privileged and majoritarian opinions. Although the narrative voice represents the villagers and their work-determined lives as authentic and of inherent worth, the novels thus partially exoticise or romanticise villagers, peasants or Adivasis to make their point.

Throughout, their perspective on the rural space includes an ideal of work that is partially defined by making experiences of *otium* possible. The concepts of work and *otium* are tightly linked: a certain (emphatic, unalienated, authentic) character of work used in the novels to represent the rural space in India implies a certain understanding of *otium* – that it is possible during work, that in the context it is characterised by a holistic experience of the rhythm of daily life. And yet this connection is only created, as has been described, through a strategy of representation from often very specific narrative points of view. Thus, the actual experiences of *otium* during work by the rural population engaged in this work remain out of reach.