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**From Repression to Resistance:
The Freudian Uncanny in Meghna Pant's
*The Man Who Lost India***

**Ms. E. Annett
Dr. K. Muthamil Selvi**

Abstract

Meghna Pant's *The Man Who Lost India* (2024) presents a chilling vision of a near-future India fractured by authoritarian rule and civil conflict. This paper offers a psychoanalytic reading of the novel, arguing that it stages a critical movement "from repression to resistance" by mobilizing the affective and structural logic of Sigmund Freud's uncanny (das Unheimliche). In Pant's dystopia, the familiar—homes, streets, language, and bodies—becomes terrifyingly estranged, manifesting as doubles, spectral hauntings, and compulsive repetitions that signal the return of politically and historically repressed traumas. However, this study moves beyond a purely Freudian framework by placing it in critical dialogue with postcolonial theory (Bhabha's "unhomely"), trauma studies (Caruth's "belatedness"), and feminist theory (Butler's "precarious life"). Through a method of close reading that combines semiotic and phenomenological interpretation, this paper demonstrates how the uncanny, when transposed to a South Asian context, operates as more than a psychological category; it becomes a cultural and political grammar that exposes structures of gendered and national repression. Crucially, the analysis shows how Pant's narrative reclaims the uncanny, transforming its inherent anxiety into

a catalyst for insurgent memory, feminist solidarity, and linguistic subversion. The novel is thus positioned as a “critical dystopia” where the return of the repressed does not merely terrorize but opens seams for resistance, making it a significant contribution to the emergent field of Indian speculative fiction and a powerful commentary on the psychodynamics of contemporary political life.

Keywords: Meghna Pant, Dystopian Fiction, Freudian Uncanny, Repression, Resistance, Postcolonial Theory, Trauma Studies

Introduction: The Unhomely Nation

Meghna Pant’s *The Man Who Lost India* reaches a moment when many novelists from the Global South are increasingly invoking speculative or dystopian modes to voice deep fears for majoritarian democracy, diminishing pluralism, and national identity. The strength of *The Man Who Lost India* is not just the sinister political vision but the psychic geography invoked by it. Its textures the familiar strange, the homely unhomely can only be described with a psychoanalytic vocabulary, namely, Sigmund Freud’s groundbreaking theorization of the uncanny (das Unheimliche). In Pant’s futuristic India of 2032, the most mundane actions open a door, speak one’s mother tongue, walk down a street one is intimately familiar with, can trigger an overwhelming anxiety, an uncanny feeling, as if our own country has been replaced by a sinister double, a doppelgänger nation, one that appears familiar on the surface, but is eerily different in unsettling ways.

This paper contends that Pant’s novel charts a movement “from repression to resistance” by systematically mobilizing the formal and affective structures of the uncanny. While Freud provides a foundational vocabulary, this study actively extends and critiques his Eurocentric model by placing it in sustained dialogue with postcolonial theory, particularly Homi Bhabha’s concept of the “unhomely”—that “shock of recognition of the world-in-the-home, the-home-in-the-world” which he identifies as a quintessential postcolonial condition (9). This critical gap—the application, re-contextualization, and provincialization of psychoanalytic concepts within the specific context of South Asian dystopian fiction—is this paper’s central intervention. It provides a fresh, politically pertinent reading of Pant’s text by locating

the uncanny in its specifically Indian socio-political realities of caste, the economy of labour and labourer, and the playful hybridisation of language.

This paper's methodological close reading of the text's language, imagery and narrative space is grounded in an affective-psychoanalytic theory. The operational definition of the Freudian uncanny as a diagnostician of text is for those 'powerful narrative moments when the familiar (a home, a body, a word, a memory) is stranger than a stranger'. This involves a semiotic and phenomenological interpretation of Pant's prose to trace how political repression materializes in the psyche and is subsequently subverted through these uncanny disruptions, paying specific attention to the aesthetics of the grotesque in bodily descriptions and the structural embedding of the uncanny within the novel's very syntax and temporal organization.

The analysis proceeds by examining key motifs that structure the narrative: unhomey spaces, fragmented temporality, the doubled self, and the insurgent reclamation of language and the body. Read this way, *The Man Who Lost India* functions not as a classic, closed dystopia but as an Indian "critical dystopia" (Moylan, *Scraps* 195): it refuses both facile utopian consolation and passive apocalyptic despair, instead leaving open a fragile but persistent horizon of insurgent imagination and collective repair. The uncanny, therefore, is not merely a theme but the very mechanism of this transformative political process.

Theoretical Foundations: Extending the Uncanny into the Postcolony

In order to situate the theoretical context within which this analysis both works and questions Pant's literary project, it might be useful to recall Freud's 1919 essay "The Uncanny." There, in definition, *das Unheimliche* is "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (124). The psychological process whereby such feelings are aroused is repression: that is, those thoughts, drives, or images which the ego cannot stand are driven below the level of consciousness, only to return in displaced and often frightening guises. Among the more well-known psychological phenomena Freud associates with the uncanny are doubles, involuntary

repetition, and the animism of inanimate objects—all of which transgress the limits of the self. Yet, as Nicholas Royle observes, the uncanny is an experience of liminality, “a peculiar commingling of the familiar and unfamiliar” which throws into suspicion any fixed divisions of inside/outside, here/there, now/then, self/other, real/imagination (1). This conceptual slipperiness makes it a remarkably adaptable critical tool.

Yet, to transplant Freud’s predominantly individual and European model into the soil of a postcolonial dystopia requires a deliberate act of theoretical translation. This is where the work of Homi Bhabha becomes indispensable. Bhabha’s “unhomely” is not the haunted house of Gothic tradition but the political invasion of private space, the moment “the world-in-the-home, the-home-in-the-world” becomes visible (9). In the postcolony, the unhomely is the public violence that seeps into the drawing-room, the historical trauma that disrupts the semblance of domestic normality. I am bangingly confirming Cathy Caruth’s definition of trauma as “not experienced at the time, but returning belatedly through nightmares, flashbacks, repetition compulsion” (4). The nation in Pant’s novel is a traumatized subject and its people suffer the uncanny as the belated return of a repressed collective history.

Naturally, the feminist critique in the novel also calls for a response to Judith Butler’s notions of precarity and grievability. Butler contends that acknowledging our shared vulnerability of the body is one way to respond ethically and politically to violence (27). In Pant’s dystopia, the state thrives on inducing uncanny anxiety about the vulnerable body, yet this vulnerability is also redeployed in acts of care giving, thus transforming the unhomeliness of the body’s fear and alienation into feminist solidarity this zigzag between Freud, Bhabha, Caruth, and Butler offers a sturdy prism with multiple angles to decode how Pant’s narrative aestheticizes fear, estrangement, and desire for liberation, and takes the uncanny beyond the psychological realm to a political grammar of dissent.

Unhomely Spaces and Psychic Dispersion

Pant portrays repression not as a global, top-down psycho-social command but as a system of capillary vessels diffusing through

the space, time and body. The spatial imagination of the novel is the first and foremost surface on which the story of the uncanny is unfolded. Safe, sacred domestic interiors—the traditional sphere of female authority and familial intimacy in the Indian context—are now vulnerable to violent raid; the mechanical eye of the drone hovers perpetually overhead; the simple, homely sound of a creaking door is psychologically amplified by the superimposed memory of doors being kicked in elsewhere. Freud explicitly situates the genesis of the uncanny in the home, the very place where the *heimlich* (homely, secret) can, with terrifying ease, turn into its opposite, the *unheimlich* (7). In Pant's India, the home is no longer a refuge but has become a prosthetic of the state, a primary site of pervasive surveillance where the private is relentlessly politicized.

Yet, it is in these subverted spaces, in the candle-lit kitchens and hidden courtyards, that new insurgent counter-publics assemble. The strange charge of such scenes is not found in the fear that is generated, but in the subversive reversal required to bring it about: it is estranged from its house-hold function as a cheap kitchen table, which is now pressed into secret service as a printing works; it is the soporific lullaby in which grandmother has cradled the baby now, and which has been handed down through generations, that is now recognised as a political password; it is the traditional ritual of mourning, which is suddenly transformed into a political meeting of the assembled counter-public. The familiar thing, the familiar practice is estranged from its house-hold use-value, and this very process of estrangement, this wobble in its fixed and familiar meaning, is the key which unlocks fear-paralysed subject positions. For he knows that the world has been turned inside out like a sleeve, and the stitch with which it was closed is now a map of its unseaming, a key to its mysteries (Pant 112).

Spatial unhomeliness is thus doubled and given a South Asian inflection by the entry into the home of caste-coded surveillance: the fear of being reported to a neighbour is not a fear of the state, but one with the historical resonance of hundreds of years of social policing and caste ostracisation. The home is like a panopticon in which the cells are constructed not just by the state, but with millennia of

internalised hierarchies. The city haunts the psyche doubly. Streets that the protagonist has walked since childhood, invested with personal memory, are now marked by army checkpoints and an enforced stillness. But the urban palimpsest persists. A fragment of old cinema poster, visible beneath a new state decree, a neighbourhood shrine, marked with the scorch marks of previous violence, inexplicably and mysteriously adorned with fresh flowers. Pant provides something that might be called an affective cartography. The reader learns to navigate the city not by its landmarks, but by its emotional topography. A pocket of dread around a particular corner. A wave of grief washing over the bank of a polluted river. An inexplicable calm in a communal courtyard surrounded by ruin. The uncanny is the point at which this affective map splits. Here, the citizen must navigate the overlapping, contradictory zones of danger and possibility, psychological repression and memory, not just cognitively, but affectively.

Embodiment and the Gendered Uncanny

The novel is relentless in its focus on bodies, particularly women's bodies, as the sites upon which the dual forces of patriarchal tradition and state biopower enact their control. Checkpoints discipline and control movement; state-manufactured scarcity dictates who eats and who waits; rumors and propaganda seek to control desire and social relations. The body of the female is metaphorically requisitioned as a fortress of communal "honor", but literally, as cheap, unpaid labor. In a remarkable, dialectical reversal, however, Pant depicts this body as a prime site of embodied resistance and insurgent care.

Pant maps out the micro-politics of care that comprise this resistance: the food queue that queues up in such a way that an elder eats first, the "secrets of contraception" that travel from woman to woman, the illicit trade of contraband sanitary napkins, the midwife, at a moment of remarkable resistance, who subverts a state-mandated naming ceremony. A close reading of this particular scene uncovers the uncanny dynamic at play: "The midwife's hands, performing the familiar, age-old ritual of swaddling, trembled not because they were tired but because a river's name—'Ganga'—had been illicitly inscribed on a birth certificate mandated by the state. The tremor, a tiny fissure in the performance of compliance, was where the uncanny entered;

the homely, nurturing act of naming became estranged, taking on a politics” (Pant 157). The familiar is made strange, but here, the strangeness is liberating.

This transformation is further crystallized in the novel’s persistent use of the grotesque. The state’s slick propaganda posters depicting idealized, ‘purified’ national bodies are constantly subverted by the narrative’s focus on the lived reality of scarred, hungry, menstruating, and aging bodies that populate its pages. This obsession with the muck, with the corporeal, with the vulnerable is totally out of key. This body-part-realism and dismemberment, if we read this through the lens of the uncanny, is not defeat but proof of a tenacious fleshy persistence that the state-monolith can never quite pass, smother, or buttress.

Here, a theoretical crosscurrent between Freud and Butler becomes vital for a full understanding. While Freud’s uncanny primarily generates anxiety from the familiar-made-strange, Butler’s framework of “precarious life” provides a lens to see how this anxiety can be refunctioned. The body’s very vulnerability and precarity, which are the sources of uncanny dread under the state’s gaze, are collectively repurposed through networks of care. This transforms the terrifying unhomeliness of the body from a condition of isolation into the very grounds for feminist solidarity and political resistance (Butler 27). The body that was a site of discipline becomes, through its shared precarity, an infrastructure of insurgency.

Language, Fear, and the Return of the Repressed

The official state language is incantatory and sterile—slogans made lifeless, initials pulled from contexts, lists that lead nowhere—all meant to kill nuance, to close off critical thought, to colonize collective memory. Words that one associates with warmth and purpose, words one once used to name freedoms, unities, nations, are perversely and cynically deployed as weapons of will. Freud defines the uncanny in part through the compulsion to repeat and the ability of words themselves to harbor and return taboo content (10); in Pant’s narrative, this repetition becomes a tool of estrangement. A patriotic phrase, repeated ad nauseam in schools and on broadcasts, becomes a

pellagra-prone shell, its hollowed-out meaning audible even to the child robotically reciting it.

And it is because of this killing of language that the sardonic parodies proliferate, the folk songs with their slightly off refrains that contain the forbidden speech, the samizdat micro-essays found in lists of recipes, the coded messages stitched into the hem of one's garment. This novel is built on a tradition of linguistic resistance that is embedded in Indian idioms of hybridity and coding, a survival technique that has existed since colonial and postcolonial times. There is much rich Hinglish punning here, local metaphors, culturally specific proverbs that function as a cipher. This is not merely a Freudian return of the repressed through repetition; it is a distinctly postcolonial strategy of subaltern speech, a form of what Bhabha, describing the resistance of the colonized, terms "sly civility"—a performative compliance that subtly undermines authority (93).

A key scene perfectly crystallizes this linguistic uncanny. A neighborhood, locked down under a repressive curfew, suddenly hears a forbidden radio crackle to life. It broadcasts a children's tale, a simple story that everyone knows by heart. Yet, in the telling, one word is off—a single, guttural shift in a single consonant. This minute offness is the secret, the coded signal. Pant's prose here masterfully enacts the return of the repressed through its own form: "The tale of the friendly *tota* (parrot) became, with a single guttural shift, the tale of the *toda* (broken)—a shattered thing that needed mending. The familiar, comforting rhythm of the story stuttered precisely at the moment of transformation, forcing a collective, belated encounter with the trauma of the broken state" (Pant 89). The familiar has become unfamiliar, and in that rupture, a political community is summoned.

This moment perfectly illustrates the necessary theoretical dialogue between Freud and Caruth. Freud's "return of the repressed" explains *what* is happening—the forbidden knowledge of a "broken" state, a repressed truth, forces its way back into public consciousness. Caruth's concept of "belatedness," on the other hand, explains *how* it happens—not as a coherent, narrative memory, but as a disruptive, stuttered, and fragmented encounter that the community must collectively navigate, interpret, and act upon (4). The uncanny, in this

sophisticated framework, is the shared affective experience of this belated political and historical return.

From Anxiety to Resistance: The Critical Dystopian Horizon

Pant's dystopia differs from its Western predecessors by its unique postcolonial temporality: classic dystopias such as "1984" look forward in a frighteningly totalitarian futurity; *The Man Who Lost India* stages repression in the dramatization of repression through the hauntingly present return of the nation's own unsettled pasts. The intergenerational psychic trauma of the 1947 Partition, a dead ghost that haunts the narrative with great frequency, is one such past. Its uncanny return via dreams, stories, and sudden violence is not an individual neurosis but a historically specific South Asian haunting. The impression that we are all reliving 1947 in 2032 is, in fact, the heart of my argument: the new repression of the state is not a novelty but a recurrence, a disturbing repetition of historical patterns of majoritarian violence and displacement. In turn, resistance is a matter of actively working-through this trauma, breaking the cycle.

But remember, Pant doesn't romanticise resistance. The book isn't for the faint-hearted: there are attritions, betrays, traumas and testing doses of physical and emotional exhaustion. Dead major characters don't make it to the next chapter; victories are small, fragile and pyrrhic. Still, the book refuses the facile satisfaction of nihilism. It embodies what Tom Moylan, in his analysis of the critical dystopia, identifies as a "hope as the surplus of collective practice"—a hope that is not a feeling but an activity, born from the very process of "making spaces and sentences where none were previously allowed" (195). The novel's concluding scenes are not grand revolutions but quiet, potent tableaux: a child asleep on a hand-drawn map of a remembered country, a single seed hidden in the sole of a worn-out shoe, a broken radio repaired with wire salvaged from a forgotten toy. These are not symbols of imminent salvation but tangible tokens of technique—quiet evidence of the daily, often invisible, labor of how people keep a world alive under the boot of power.

The uncanny, in this final analysis, is re-functioned from a source of terror into a form of craft. It becomes a way of seeing and making, a method of taking the old, familiar materials of culture,

language, and relationship and rendering them new and strange enough to help navigate the encompassing dark. In other words, the overall movement of the novel from repression to resistance routes straight through the affective space and structural space of the uncanny. The state deploys a top-down form of unhomeliness in order to dissolve old solidarities and isolate us; we, the people, reappropriate this unhomeliness from the bottom up, using its disorienting power to construct new, makeshift, and stronger forms of community. The anchors that held our lives up – home, street, story, body – are shaking; but it is in this shaking that we find connection and anchoring again. The uncanny is the spring, the pivot on which this world falls, from what it was made to forget, to what it now insists on remembering and building.

Conclusion

Reading Meghna Pant's *The Man Who Lost India* through the extended lens of the Freudian uncanny has enabled a critical analysis that tenaciously holds political structure and psychic life in a single, dynamic frame. The novel insists with powerful clarity that modern authoritarianism colonizes not only laws, armies, and public squares but also, and perhaps more insidiously, the most intimate spheres of life: the safety of rooms, the bonds of kinship, the nuances of idiom, and the very reflexes of the body. Pant's future India is terrifying precisely because of its recognizability, its proximity to our present, and the uncanny, as both a thematic and a formal device, sharpens this recognition from a vague anxiety into a precise tool for critical awareness and resistance.

This paper has mapped that transformative movement across several interconnected planes: spatially, in the unhomely home and the psychically doubled city; temporally, in the compulsive, belated return of an unmourned, traumatic history; subjectively, in the revealing slippages and fractures of the divided self; linguistically, in the hollowed-out official slogan and the vibrant, minor languages of survival; and corporeally, in the vulnerable, precarious, yet ultimately insurgent and caring body. Pant's novel thus powerfully extends the genre of the "critical dystopia," a form in which hope persists not as a naive fantasy

of overnight overthrow but as a gritty, daily technique of survival, reassembly, and stubborn maintenance.

For serious scholarly study of contemporary Indian literature and culture, the implications of this reading are dual. First, one should read the emerging genre of dystopian texts from the region not as political manuals, but as all-purpose haunted houses of feeling, safe places to rehearse the distinctive sensations of political decline and to develop a finer sense of the faint, uncanny returns by which repression always surfs and self-destructs. Second, academic criticism needs to take more seriously, and more solemnly, the underground infrastructure of resistance that the fictions so wonderfully reveal: the vernacular archive, the system of jokes and songs, the staged and ritualized choreography of queues, the shadowy, illicit circuits of care.

In closing, *The Man Who Lost India* reveals an elemental psycho-political insight: repression cannot repress forever what it fears. The return of the repressed, psychoanalytic and historical truth, is a fact of individual and collective life; the highly contingent, open question, is, when it returns, will that return terrorise a people into submission and silence or will it radicalise a people into speech, solidarity and social action? Pant's text, with total conviction, stakes its bets on the latter. Its story, its lesson, how to deal with the uncanny when it comes, how to read its fatal overtures both for lesson and terror, and how to turn the estranged into the commingled. If the dystopian setting is the environment then the uncanny is at once the symptom of the disease and the weapon with which to cure it; it names the plague but it sneaks in the guillotine by its seal. And out of that small, precise nick, people together make passages—narrow, risky, but ultimately sufficient—towards forms of life and community that power does not authorize and can never quite completely snuff out.

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