Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry, pp 1–21
 doi:10.1017/pli.2020.21

The Semi-Peripheral Novel: Narrating the Neoliberal Present from Southern India and Southern Italy

Gabriele Lazzari

This articles intervenes in current debates about the configuration of the contemporary literary system and argues that works coming from the intermediate formation of the semi-periphery can most lucidly register how neoliberalism has transformed the social, economic, and affective structures of the historical present. Drawing on postcolonial criticism, world-systems theory, and theories of combined and uneven development, I propose a comparative study of two novels originating from southern India and southern Italy, Vivek Shanbhag's Ghachar Ghochar *(2013) and Nicola Lagioia's* La Ferocia *(2014). By analyzing how residual forces—patriarchy, gender violence, and familism—interact with processes of market neoliberalization and environmental destruction, this article further suggests that only the formal study of novels from semi-peripheral areas can problematize current critical paradigms based on binary oppositions (center/periphery, North/South). To do so, I develop a systemic approach that is attentive to how contextual specificities produce formal outcomes that can best diagnose global socioeconomic inequalities.*

Keywords: semi-periphery, India, Italy, neoliberalism, world-system, contemporary novel, space

In the last decade, the concept of peripherality has proved to be particularly useful to literary scholars aiming to explore how aesthetic form responds to socioeconomic and political changes. Unlike previous critical terms that were highly discipline-specific, peripherality, as Jed Esty and Colleen Lye have argued,[1] seems to be better suited to providing a common analytical ground to disciplines that have traditionally focused on marginalized artistic works and subject positions (from postcolonial studies to ethnic and area studies). Furthermore, thinking in terms of peripherality allows to critically engage with a fact that is often acknowledged but not sufficiently analyzed in literary scholarship—that the economic configuration and cultural transactions in today's world

Gabriele Lazzari is a PhD candidate in comparative literature at Rutgers University. His dissertation explores the resurgence of a new global realism from peripheral areas of the literary system. His writings have appeared or are forthcoming in *Comparative Literature*, *Research in African Literatures*, *Comparative Literature Studies*, and *Public Books*. (Email: gabriele.lazzari@rutgers.edu)

1 See Esty and Lye's introductory essay to a special issue of *Modern Language Quarterly* on peripheral realism. Jed Esty and Colleen Lye, "Peripheral Realisms Now," *Modern Language Quarterly* 73.3 (2012): 269–88.

are determined by increasingly stark conditions of unevenness. This means also that the qualifier *peripheral* should be preferred to *alternative* because the latter has failed to address "the global integration under an imperialist world-system"[2] and the consequent unequal interactions among its geographies.

The notion of peripherality, it must be noted, was developed by Immanuel Wallerstein within the larger framework of world-systems theory. This theory is still looked at with suspicion in some sectors of literary scholarship that consider it reductionist because inattentive to noneconomic dynamics and to the subtleties of cultural expression.[3] In the course of this article, I instead suggest that the analysis of peripheral spaces and subject positions allows, on the one hand, to investigate the impact of capitalist forces in areas whose social and cultural dynamics cannot be understood outside a global framework, and on the other, to consider the contextual forces that make literary expression particularly apt for analyzing localized narrative responses and their formal specificities. The critical use of peripherality must then be understood within the wider concept of an integrated system that functions precisely on the perpetuation of unevenness and on the continuous production of marginalized areas.

Although I draw upon a critical framework founded on the opposition between core and periphery, this article aims to complicate such dichotomy by focusing on the intermediate concept of the semi-periphery through the analysis of two contemporary novels set in southern India and in southern Italy, Vivek Shanbhag's *Ghachar Ghochar*, published in 2013 in Kannada and translated in 2015 into English by Srinath Perur, and Nicola Lagioia's *La Ferocia*, published in 2014 in Italian and translated in 2017 by Anthony Shugaar as *Ferocity*.[4] As I analyze these two texts and discuss how they stage the impact of neoliberalism in two geographically distant but systemically comparable areas, I suggest that the position of these regions in the contemporary world-system affords Shanbhag and Lagioia a vantage point: in making seemingly contradictory yet perfectly integratable forces generative of narrative form, *Ghachar Ghochar* and *La Ferocia* articulate the combination of traditional social formations and capitalist modernization in semi-peripheral areas.[5] More specifically, I suggest that semi-peripheral novelistic expression is premised on the exploration of how residual forces—patriarchy, familism, and gendered violence among others—intersect with processes of market neoliberalization and environmental destruction.

2 Esty and Lye, "Peripheral Realisms Now," 273.

3 For a thorough recapitulation of these divergent positions, see David Palumbo-Liu, Bruce Robbins, and Nirvana Tanoukhi, eds., *Immanuel Wallerstein and the Problem of the World. System, Scale, Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 1–26.

4 Vivek Shanbhag, *Ghachar Ghochar*, trans. Srinath Perur (New York: Penguin, 2017); Nicola Lagioia, *Ferocity*, trans. Anthony Shugaar (New York: Europa Editions, 2017).

5 In a 1976 article tellingly titled "Semi-Peripheral Countries and the Contemporary World Crisis," Wallerstein had intuited that it was in those intermediate spaces that new configurations of the world-system could emerge. As US hegemony was waning and the Socialist bloc was breaking apart, Wallerstein saw in semiperipheral nations a dynamism that was absent elsewhere: because of the distinctiveness of "their internal politics and their social structure," Wallerstein argued, "their ability to take advantage of the flexibilities offered by the downturns of economic activity is in general greater than that of either the core or the peripheral countries." Immanuel Wallerstein, "Semi-Peripheral Countries and the Contemporary World Crisis," *Theory and Society* 3.4 (1976): 463.

In the course of my discussion, I contend that the advantages of looking at the intermediate formation of the semi-periphery are multiple: first, this approach problematizes, and ultimately rejects, the notion of alternativeness and its consequent and reductive assumption that there exist two cohesive entities (the West and "the rest"). I instead show that semi-peripheral areas can exist within nations that are considered part of the West (in this case, Italy) as well as in economically emerging nations that have traditionally been thought as "the rest" (India). The process of peripheralization can happen in any area of the world-system and does not imply alternativeness or exclusion from that system. On the contrary, as the Warwick Research Collective (WReC) has compellingly argued, peripherality "names a modality of specific *inclusion* within a system: a given formation is 'peripheral,' that is to say, not because it is 'outside' or 'on the edges' of a system, but, on the contrary, because it has been incorporated in that system precisely as 'peripheral.'"[6]

Within this systemic approach, the intermediate formation of the semi-periphery is particularly interesting to study because it is where elements belonging to so-called "core economies" coexist—often contradictorily—with forms of sociocultural and economic organization that are typically found in peripheralized spaces. Semi-peripheral spaces thus experience phenomena such as accelerated capitalist development, technological innovation, and financialization of capital but are the same time characterized by elements that are peculiar to areas being kept in a state of underdevelopment by global capitalism: among them, lack of infrastructure, widespread poverty, strong influence of residual forces and cultural forms, and the presence of economic and social organizations that are alternative to or openly at war with the state, such as the Mafia or other criminal organizations. This mix of discordant phenomena and forces results, on the one hand, in heightened social conflicts and contradictions and, on the other, in a more pronounced historical dynamism that novelist expression captures on the level of form.

Furthermore, the analysis of literatures from semi-peripheral areas can help us to reframe the dynamics of interaction between the global south and the global north, particularly in spaces that cannot be easily ensconced in either of these two macro-categories. As Roberto Dainotto has argued in his analysis of the ideological invention of Europe,[7] the construction of Europe's cultural and epistemic hegemony has been premised on the erasure of its internal other—a South that belongs to the North only as its obliterated counterpart. At the same time, categorizing India as simply part of the global south involves an oversimplification of its specificities, from its rising economic trajectory to the linguistic and cultural multiplicity that make this regional system difficult to grasp within canonical theorizations of world literature.[8] Therefore, although the pairing of these two regions might seem far-fetched, I do believe there are elements that allow for this kind of comparative analysis and that make it fruitful for a larger reconsideration of the contemporary novel's engagement with space in relation to social, economic, and cultural dynamics. On the one hand, it is undeniable that the Italian

6 Warwick Research Collective (WReC), *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool, England: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 123–24 (italics in original).

7 Roberto Dainotto, *Europe (In Theory)* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

8 On the peculiarities of India's literary field, see Francesca Orsini, "India in the Mirror of World Fiction," *New Left Review* 13 (2002): 75–88.

South, while being peripheral to its own North, enjoys a series of political privileges deriving from being part of the European Union and, in a global perspective, from participating in the epistemic hegemony associated with Europe's imperial histories. At the same time, however, if we take a closer look, the history of the European South in general and of the Italian South in particular—as well as its current economic situation—place this space in a position that is much closer to that of postcolonial India than we might initially suspect. First of all, from the perspective of the philosophical and political theorization of Europe's exceptionality and dominance, the European South has historically been constructed as "the negative latitude—or more properly, an 'exception'—in the dialectics of Europe."[9] This idea of the European South as the exception, as the internal other, as the unassimilable counterpart reverberates throughout the history of the continent and continues to inform the current economic policies of the European Union, as well as the ideological stance of northern countries toward southern ones—for instance through the imposition of strict fiscal reforms that are structurally analogous to those implemented by the World Trade Organization and the World Bank in developing nations.

Even more significantly in the case of southern Italy, its position vis-à-vis the North has been historically characterized by *de facto* colonial relations. It is then at this juncture of semi-peripherality and postcoloniality that the comparison I develop becomes particularly productive. In the last decades, a growing body of scholarly research has been drawing interesting connections between postcolonial studies and Italian studies,[10] along three main axes of investigation: Italy's colonization of eastern Africa, recent waves of migrations from postcolonial countries, and the still unresolved southern question—that is, the construction of the Italian South as backward and incapable of economic development and, as a result, its failed integration into the ideological construction of the nation. Antonio Gramsci was the first to analyze the South's subalternity and the economic policies that, after Italy's unification in 1861, "reduced [it] to the status of a semi-colonial market."[11] Crucially, Gramsci noticed that the economic underdevelopment of the South was described by northerners rather than as the result of "objective economic and political conditions," as an immutable state due to intrinsic, essential features, such as "the organic incapacity of the inhabitants, their barbarity, their biological inferiority."[12] This kind of racialized explanation that served as a justification for the political and economic oppression of a territory strikingly resembles theories of racial, ethnic, religious, or cultural difference that Empire has notoriously produced to reinforce colonial domination. As Pasquale Verdicchio has argued in one of the first essays on southern Italy's colonial condition, there is an evident historical and ideological juncture between the colonial annexation of the South in the 1860s, the portrayal of its populations as "feminized, inferior, uncivilized, and

9 Roberto Dainotto, "Does Europe Have a South?" *The Global South* 5.1 (2011): 44.

10 For an exhaustive review of the most important contributions to this field of study, see Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo, eds., *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012): 1–29.

11 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, eds. and trans. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971): 269.

12 Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 233.

ineffective,"[13] and the beginning of Italy's imperial project with the colonization of Eritrea in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

This is why several scholars write of Italy's "internal colonialism"[14] when discussing its South. In line with these critical interventions, my article considers postcoloniality "as an intranational and transhistorical category of analysis,"[15] with the further implication that the Italian South's current semi-peripheral condition can only be understood by locating it within a longer historical trajectory that takes into account both the continental framework—with the construction of the European South as the unassimilable other—and the national scale—Italy's construction of its own internal alterity. My comparison between southern India and southern Italy is thus founded on the historical experience of some form of coloniality and on a shared condition of economic, social, and cultural marginality that still characterizes these spaces, along with the decisive presence of advanced neoliberal development. In doing so, I acknowledge the linguistic, cultural, and social peculiarities of these two regions, as well as their irreducible histories, but at the same time argue for the critical potential of a common framework—global neoliberalism and semi-peripheral positioning—for the analysis of how local cultural substrata interact with these forces and produce, at the level of narrative form, different yet comparable outcomes.

This methodology, which brings together a systemic perspective with a more granular analysis of contextual elements and cultural specificities, is also meant to complement current theories of world literature that propose a master grid, such as the world literary system and its power asymmetries,[16] with a more sustained study of areas that have not received enough critical attention or that are subsumed into larger frameworks, which cannot account for their peculiarities. In this sense, the analysis I develop wants to highlight the importance of systematicity and the critical advantages of a world-oriented methodology for the study of contemporary literature, yet without neglecting that each cultural space will engage with global forces differentially. Within the scope of this article, this means that the irruption of neoliberalism in southern India and southern Italy is to be measured against some specific features of the regions under study: for Italy, a geographically uneven development, its ecocidal consequences, and the role of residual forces such as Catholicism; for India, the redefinition of gender dynamics in relation to neoliberalism, the distribution of power within the family unit, and an understanding of familism as both an ideological formation and an economic asset.

My analysis thus sets off from the hypothesis that the peculiar combination of contradictory elements and forces in semi-peripheral spaces can illuminate dynamics that are global in nature but are more dramatically visible and more extremely felt in these semi-peripheral areas. As Franco Moretti has argued, "world texts"—that is, texts whose imaginative horizon is the world as a whole—come from regions "where

13 Pasquale Verdicchio, "The Preclusion of Postcolonial Discourse in Southern Italy," in *Revisioning Italy: National Identity and Global Culture*, eds. Beverly Allen and Mary Russo (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997): 197.

14 Lombardi-Diop and Romeo, *Postcolonial Italy*, 4.

15 Lombardi-Diop and Romeo, *Postcolonial Italy*, 5.

16 From Pascale Casanova's seminal work to the Warwick Research Collective's theory of combined and uneven development. See Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005).

historically non-homogeneous social and symbolic forms, after originating in quite disparate places, coexist in a confined space."[17] In the case of *La Ferocia* and *Ghachar Ghochar*, the restricted geographical focus (*La Ferocia* is set mostly between the cities of Bari and Taranto, *Ghachar Ghochar* is entirely set in Bangalore), rather than being a limit, is a spatial requisite for articulating a narrative framework in which world-historical phenomena—the transition to neoliberalism and the consequent reconfiguration of social and affective structures—are given novelistic form.

Restricted spatial focus, heightened social and economic contradictions, and convergence of accelerated development and residual formations are therefore crucial in determining the semi-peripheral novel's more pronounced diagnostic potential. In this sense, my analysis seriously considers, as Esty and Lye write, "the possibility that peripheral standpoints themselves afford distinctive epistemic advantages in descriptions of global capitalism in the post–Cold War period."[18] It is nonetheless key to stress that the relevance of texts coming from the margins of the system is not intrinsically given, as a kind of ontological a priori; instead, this epistemic advantage derives from their distinctive ability to formally register evolving social and economic dynamics or, in Fredric Jameson's words, "to seize [history] at its moment of emergence."[19] It is precisely during these moments of emergence, Jameson continues, that "the Real might appear without warning, and disappear again if we are not alert to catch it."[20] This means that, on the one hand, historical transitions are more pronounced in semi-peripheral spaces because of their specific structural conditions, but also that there needs to be a kind of alertness, which depends precisely on the novel's semi-peripheral positionality and locus of enunciation.

The central historical transition that *La Ferocia* and *Ghachar Ghochar* register with tragic clarity is a specific moment of capitalist modernity in semi-peripheral areas, that is, the consolidation of neoliberalism. In both texts, neoliberalism is framed not only as a series of economic principles and social regulations, but, most decisively, as a new modality of being in the world. In articulating how the neoliberal episteme integrates with social and symbolic structures that preceded it, the two novels deploy formal strategies that reveal the spatial, temporal, and epistemic horizons of neoliberalism while diagnosing its impact on the social and affective fabric of world semi-peripheries. In its broadest definition, *neoliberalism* refers to "state policy interventions in the economy such as the privatisation of state or public resources, the curtailment of state welfare provisions, deregulation of trade and labour markets, and state initiatives to weaken organised labour."[21] Yet, in areas of the world-system that have been gradually peripheralized, it also involves a series of structural adjustments coordinated by global policy-making institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade

17 Franco Moretti, *Modern Epic: The World-System from Goethe to García Márquez*, trans. Quintin Hoare (London, England: Verso, 1996), 50.

18 Esty and Lye, "Peripheral Realisms Now," 280.

19 Fredric Jameson, "Antinomies of the Realism-Modernism Debate," *Modern Language Quarterly*, 73.3 (2012): 480.

20 Jameson, "Antinomies of the Realism-Modernism Debate," 480.

21 Emily Johansen and Alissa G. Karl, "Introduction: Reading and Writing in the Economic Present," *Textual Practice* 29.2 (2008): 203.

Organization.[22] Particularly in these areas, the social and environmental effects of neoliberal reforms have been disastrous. And although recent scholarship has rightly cautioned against the use of this term as a buzzword, emptied of critical traction,[23] neoliberalism remains an extremely useful concept to mobilize when we are trying to grasp how an economic and ideological framework can shape political structures, and at the same time change social and affective relations at various scales, in particular at the level of the family unit.

My interest thus lies in connecting neoliberalism, as an economic system and a mode of being in the world, to the evolution of literary form from semi-peripheral areas. In this sense, one of the premises of my analysis is that neoliberalism, as the latest phase of capitalism, possesses some peculiar features that makes it qualitatively different from previous stages of capitalist development. In his discussion of neoliberalism as a political-theological formation, Adam Kotsko writes that "[neoliberalism] aspires to be a complete way of life and a holistic worldview, in a way that previous modes of capitalism did not."[24] This all-encompassing ambition, when combined with forms of social and cultural organization that are peculiar to semi-peripheral spaces, results in more drastic processes of social and affective restructuring. As *Ghachar Ghochar* and *La Ferocia* cogently show, neoliberalist transitions in southern India and southern Italy redefine the economic relations within the family unit as well as the norms of interactions of their members by exploiting previous gender hierarchies. At the same time, neoliberalism reshapes the organization of both social and narrative spaces while establishing new coordinates for individual ambitions and desires. In other words, it is lived and narratively rendered as an unprecedented, totalizing experience.

At the same time, and despite the increasing availability of works of fiction interested in exploring neoliberal transitions from peripheral perspectives, critical attention on neoliberalism and the novel is still asymmetrically distributed. Consider for instance the recent collection of essays in *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*,[25] which, even though it offers an excellent frame of analysis and a series of acute close readings, restricts its purview to novels from the United States and Great Britain. This is a decisive limitation, for it reinforces the false assumption that neoliberalism is a Euro-American invention, and that, as such, is best understood and analyzed in works coming from its supposedly originating contexts.[26] This article argues instead that we need to focus on peripheral locales and on texts written in nonhegemonic languages that

22 For a discussion of the geographically uneven effects of neoliberalism, see David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), chap. 4.

23 Jane Elliot and Gillian Harkin, "Introduction: Genres of Neoliberalism," *Social Text* 115.31 (2013): 2.

24 Adam Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons: On the Political Theology of Late Capitalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 6. Discussing Silvia Federici's work on the consequences of the World Bank's Structural Adjustment Program in Nigeria, Kotsko adds that neoliberalism is "not an economic *as opposed to* social process, nor is it a process that seeks only to destroy society and get it out of the way. Rather, it is an equally economic and social process that actively seeks to reshape society into a form that can support and reproduce capitalist relations, using coercive as well as discursive forces (such as moral exhortation or scapegoating)" (76).

25 Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith, eds., *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2017).

26 On the contrary, as David Harvey argues, neoliberalism is an economic, political, and conceptual apparatus developed in globally diffused institutional and academic circles, and first concretely enforced in

offer a more complex perspective on the impact of neoliberalism across multiple geographies and cultural-literary contexts. As Sarah Brouillette has pointed out, "In setting up a critique of the marketization and economization of things that were ostensibly nonmarket, what it is too often ignored … is the total global picture in its dynamic historical emergence."[27] Semi-peripheral novels thus compel us to consider the "total global picture" and to approach texts from a systemic perspective. Most importantly, they encourage us to write histories of the literary present in light of the global effects of neoliberalism in areas that have been peripheralized economically and in terms of critical attention, despite the fact that their literatures can offer powerful diagnostic tools for understanding contemporaneity. Only this kind of analysis can thus reveal that the location and spatiality of the novel are not merely geographical indicators, but strategies to illuminate how the unevenness and power imbalances of the world system get mediated in narrative form.

Ghachar Ghochar first appeared in 2013 in Kannada, a language that is currently spoken by more than 50 million people in the Karnataka region of India. It was the titular novella of a collection of short stories authored by Vivek Shanbhag, who at the time was already a fairly established writer in the Kannada literary field, having been writing for thirty years.[28] The novel received positive reviews in *The Hindu*, a major English-language newspaper with a determining role in promoting texts written in vernacular languages and increasing their intraregional visibility.[29] Although some of Shanbhag's previous works had already been translated into English, it was the success of *Ghachar Ghochar* that granted him access to the world literary stage. The novella was translated by Srinath Perur, journalist and writer, who worked in close collaboration with the author. Published in the United Kingdom in 2015 and in the United States in 2016, it was the second Kannada novel ever to reach the US public, despite Kannada's millennial literary history. Its critical success has been as momentous as it was unexpected.

Leveraging the established model of the rags-to-riches plot, Shanbhag condenses in little more than one hundred pages a commentary on southern India's economic transformations in the last three decades, a psychological portrait of a family, and an investigation of different forms of violence (gendered and economic). Except for the first and last chapter, set in the narrative present, the rest of the novella recounts in nonchronological order a series of brief scenes that get progressively arranged into a rather straightforward plot: after the narrator's father (Appa), who is the sole provider of

Chile, after Pinochet's coup in 1973. When it was exported to the United States in the 1980s, "a brutal experiment carried out in the periphery became a model for the formulation of policies in the centre" (9).

27 Sarah Brouillette, "Neoliberalism and the Demise of the Literary," in *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, eds. Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2017), 277.

28 Elizabeth Kuruvilla and Vivek Shanbhag, "Translating Ananthamurthy Is a Political Act: Vivek Shanbhag," *Livemint*, February 25, 2016 [www.livemint.com/Leisure/0GIJaFUFuqqTxpmAkRhUBJ/Translating-Ananthamurthy-is-a-political-act-Vivek-Shanbhag.html].

29 Deepa Ganesh writes that Shanbhag's "control over style and technique … open up his vision of life" (Deepa Ganesh, "To See Beyond Sense," *The Hindu*, January 8, 2013 [www.thehindu.com/features/metroplus/to-see-beyond-sense/article4286789.ece 2013]) and adds that Shanbhag "marks the quiet human aspiration to move towards a cosmopolitan identity, but at the same time longs to reclaim the creative energies embedded in the past" (Deepa Ganesh, "Beyond Space and Self," *The Hindu*, March 29, 2013 [www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-features/tp-fridayreview/beyond-space-and-self/article4560197.ece 2013]).

a family living on the brink of poverty, loses his job, he invests his retirement benefits and joins his brother (Chikkapa) in a business venture consisting of buying spices in bulk and reselling them. The unexpected economic success of the business (called Sona Masala) allows the family to buy another house in an upmarket neighborhood, to lavishly spend on the marriage of the narrator's sister (Malati), and to create a salaried position for the narrator—"director of the firm"[30]—exempting him from the obligation to perform any actual work. Tension ensues when Anita, an outspoken woman who joins the family through a semi-arranged marriage with the narrator, brings to the surface the structures of power that govern the household. By the end of the narrative, a series of implicit and more overt cues suggest that Anita has been killed, possibly by the same mobsters the family regularly hires to punish the insolvent clients who might jeopardize their violently secured economic status.

Ghachar Ghochar has been praised for its formal rigor; a reviewer defines it as "crisply plotted"[31]—and for its stylistic austerity—another applauds the "marvelous brevity of [Shanbhag's] writing."[32] Yet, the same formal features that make it compellingly readable are also indices of a structure of obfuscation (or utter erasure) that undergirds its narrative and ideological core. The story is told from a rigidly focalized perspective, which generates a sort of formal claustrophobia that subtly invites the reader to sympathize with the narrator's feelings, grievances, and worldview. Shanbhag's choice of this restricted point of view has two main—and antithetical—consequences: on the one hand, it emphatically directs the reader's attention toward the narrator's discontent about the affective collapse of his family—a process that he imputes to their newly acquired wealth.[33] At the same time, however, the narrator's insistence on this ideological critique obfuscates what the novel's narrow focalization and formal structures actually reveal, that is, the combination of familism, violence, patriarchy, and ruthless pursuit of capital accumulation that have defined the experience of neoliberalism in world semi-peripheries.

Consider, for instance, familism and private entrepreneurship, two principles premised on opposite understandings of how society should be organized (the family and the individual). Indeed, throughout the novel, the narrator frames them as opposing and incompatible forces, praising the kind of solidarity and affective connection that had bonded the members of the family before their economic ascent and condemning the destructive individualism that progressively takes them apart. In one of the several passages in which the narrator expresses his moral and ideological stance, he comments on Malati's separation from her husband in his typical, sententious tone: "In the new house, we were locked in the cells of individual rooms, and there was no opportunity to exchange casual confidences. Lying alone in my room, I sometimes wondered if Malati's

30 Shanbhag, *Ghachar Ghochar*, 69.

31 Parul Sehgal, "A Great Indian Novel Reaches American Shores," *New York Times*, April 6, 2017, 27.

32 Sujeet Rajan, "*Ghachar Ghochar* Book Review: Tightly-Woven Novel Is a Terrific Read," *News India Times*, March 10, 2017, 24.

33 In one of the most ideologically explicit passages, the narrator pontificates: "It's true what they say—it's not we who control money, it's the money that controls us. When there's only a little, it behaves meekly; when it grows, it becomes brash and has its way with us. Money had swept us up and flung us in the midst of a whirlwind" (Shanbhag, *Ghachar Ghochar*, 53).

happiness would have been better served had Sona Masala not existed at all."[34] In opposing the communal structure of their previous house to the compartmentalized organization of their new one, the narrator spatializes a fairly hackneyed critique that opposes a preneoliberal time of social cohesion to the oppressive atomization that the family experiences after they move (rhetorically, this is achieved through the insisted parallel between the house and the prison, emphasized by the choice of "we were locked" and "cells"). If, as David Harvey argues, the foundational principle of neoliberalism is that "human well-being can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills,"[35] the narrator is here contesting the equivalence between well-being and entrepreneurial individualism, while praising intrafamilial cohesion as both ethically sound and socially desirable. However, the problem with the narrator's ideological critique, which the focalization throws into sharper relief by exposing it as myopic and asystematic, is that, throughout the novel, the family's preservation of its economic status is shown to depend precisely on familism, that is, on an implicit intrafamilial pact against any external agent that could menace its wealth as well as the reproduction of its structuring hierarchies. Despite the narrator's convictions, it is actually *after* the success of Sona Masala that the family discovers a new kind of cohesion, necessary to guard its economic prosperity.

Ghachar Ghochar thus shows the contradictory yet functional integration of entrepreneurial individualism and familism, whereby the family's status and riches have to be preserved by any means necessary. This seemingly contradictory integration makes perfect sense when seen from a wider historical perspective; as Adam Kotsko has argued, "neoliberalism carries out its own 'great transformation' by reconfiguring the relationship between the political and the economic and reimagining the household precisely as a site of indefinite accumulation."[36] Unsurprisingly, indefinite accumulation can involve violence. When Malati wants to recover her jewelry from her ex-husband's (Ravi), she visits his house with a gang of mobsters who terrorize him and his parents (an unnecessary but highly symbolic performance of power). We later learn that the same gang, whose members Chikkapa calls "recovery agents,"[37] is regularly hired to extort payments from clients of Sona Masala. As the family's economic climb progresses, one of the central ontological tenets of neoliberalism—the pursue of well-being through individual achievements—gets integrated into a more traditional understanding of the family as the basic social unit.

But downward mobility and loss of capital are not the only menace that the discourse of *Ghachar Ghochar* identifies, for the family has to guard itself also against external agents that threaten to subvert its internal hierarchies of power. Because—and not coincidentally—these external agents are always women, the novel shows another form of combination in the neoliberalist episteme of semi-peripheral spaces, that between patriarchy, gendered violence, and middle-class upward mobility. Scholarship on gender and nationalism has convincingly shown the centrality of specific

34 Shanbhag, *Ghachar Ghochar*, 61.
35 Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 2.
36 Adam Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons: On the Political Theology of Late Capitalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 71.
37 Shanbhag, *Ghachar Ghochar*, 60.

constructions of gender for the imagination of national identities and the enforcement of strictly hierarchized social structures.[38] Particularly in the case of South Asian nations, representational and material practices aimed at rigidly defining gender roles and prerogatives have contributed to the construction of an extremely powerful and normative idea of femininity.[39] In the case of India, as Rupal Oza has argued, it is impossible to analyze the nation's transition to neoliberalist forms of social and economic organization without understanding how, starting in the 1990s, anxieties about globalization and loss of national sovereignty have caused the progressive fortification of rigid gender and sexual identities: "in the context of India's intensified encounter with global capital," Oza maintains, "the concomitant loss of sovereignty has resulted in the displacement of control onto national culture and identity."[40] In other words, the emergence of a small, affluent middle-class has coincided with the fortification of gender hierarchies—hierarchies that in turn have guaranteed the reproduction of economic unevenness, both at the familial and at the societal level.

Ghachar Ghochar, in registering how patriarchy and gendered violence intersect with neoliberalism, also reveals how these forces formally compartmentalize the discursive space and delimit the agential possibilities of the characters. The novel is in fact very rigidly structured: of its seven chapters, the first and the last (because of their narratively prominent position) unequivocally establish the narrator's discursive authority. Starting with the second, the narrator explicitly links the chapter division and sequence with the power hierarchies in the family: in the second chapter, he introduces Chikkapa, "the central figure in [the] household" and "the family's sole earner";[41] the third chapter is focused on his father, Appa, Chikkapa's business partner and, as such, second in the hierarchy; the fourth opens with these words: "Amma, Malati, and I—we're tied for third place in the household hierarchy";[42] the fifth chapter focuses on Malati's failed marriage, and the sixth chronicles the semi-arranged marriage between the narrator and Anita and how her arrival in the family starts disrupting its precarious equilibrium by calling into question the distribution of power among its members. Because the formal organization of the narrative mirrors the inflexibly defined space of action and agency of each character, *Ghachar Ghochar* clearly identifies the potential agents of narrative and economic disruption: two women—Suhasini and Anita—who come to represent the central discursive and ideological threats to the neoliberal episteme that defines the novel's historical, political, and narrative coordinates.

38 On the intersections of gender, sexuality, and nation-building, see Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer, and Patricia Yaeger, *Nationalisms and Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather. Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995); and Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* (New York: Sage Publications, 1997).

39 Contemporary feminist scholarship on South Asia has shown how current political formations and social movements are, not without profound contradictions, challenging hegemonic constructions of gender. See, in particular, Ania Loomba and Ritty A. Lukose, eds., *South Asian Feminisms: Contemporary Interventions* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015); and Srila Roy, ed., *New South Asian Feminisms. Paradoxes and Possibilities* (London, England: Zed Books, 2012).

40 Rupal Oza, *The Making of Neoliberal India: Nationalism, Gender, and the Paradoxes of Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

41 Shanbhag, *Ghachar Ghochar*, 11.

42 Shanbhag, *Ghachar Ghochar*, 39.

In the second chapter, the narrator recounts a troubling episode he had witnessed a few weeks before, when a woman unknown to the family had come to their house carrying a container of *masoor dal* curry and looking for Chikkapa. As soon as he is informed of the visit, Chikkapa, who is hiding in his room, instructs Amma to tell her that he is not at home. What follows is a tense confrontation between the unknown woman—the reader later discovers that her name is Sushaini, Chikkapa's lover—who makes clear that she just wants to see Chikkapa, and Amma and Malati, who refuse to let her in. The scene culminates with Amma throwing to the ground the container of food Sushaini had brought and aggressively yelling invectives against the helpless visitor. From his perspectival vantage, the narrator comments: "The woman had not abused us. She had not come here to pick a fight. We were thrown off balance by her love for one of us, and so we tore into her with such vengeance that she collapsed to the ground, sobbing."[43] Immediately after, he adds: "On that day I became convinced that it is the words of women that wounds other women most deeply."[44] This completely misguided interpretation, which explains away the family's rage with gendered theories of linguistic aggressiveness and with a self-exempting notion of familial love, throws into sharp relief the actual reason behind this excessive show of violence, that is, the necessity to protect the economic assets of the family by preserving its internal hierarchies. What the myopic analysis of the narrator obfuscates is, in other words, the intrafamilial pact in which familism, patriarchy, and safeguarding of capital get combined to violently contain any agent of disturbance. Moreover, because this aggression aimed at protecting the sole origin of the family's wealth is perpetrated by Amma and Malati, this pivotal scene also challenges paternalistic narratives that portray women simply as victims of gendered violence, and in so doing ignore their central role in the enforcement and reproduction of social and economic hierarchies in the neoliberal episteme.[45]

But there is yet another character that exposes the novel's ideological core by violating what the narrator calls "an unwritten rule that all members come to the family's aid when it is threatened."[46] It is his wife, Anita, who is the only one to voice her dissent for how Sushaini has been treated and who, in doing so, comes to embody the most urgent threat to the economic wealth of the family, to its rigidly defined hierarchies, and to the neoliberal structure of feeling that the novel powerfully registers—a structure of feeling premised on the intersection of capital, power, and affect, as Anita unequivocally makes clear.[47] After Amma's aggression, she tells her: "'You want to ensure that

43 Shanbhag, *Ghachar Ghochar*, 17.

44 Shanbhag, *Ghachar Ghochar*, 17.

45 Relatedly, Anita Loomba and Ritty A. Lukose note that scholarship on contemporary communal violence in South East Asia "has shown that women are not just targets of violence but also passionate advocates of the ideology of community, honor, shame, revenge, and masculinity that shape such violence" (Loomba and Lukose, *South Asian Feminisms*, 10).

46 Shanbhag, *Ghachar Ghochar*, 18.

47 The notion of structure of feeling, developed by Raymond Williams, is particularly adequate here because it stresses the "specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationship" (Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1977, 132) as they are actively experienced in social practices—in *Ghachar Ghochar*'s case, within the microdynamics of the narrator's family. Williams considers this notion—rather than "more formal concepts" (132) such as worldview or ideology—key to his understanding of social experience as something that is affectively lived in a nonfixed, dynamic, and contradictory process.

Chikkapa remains unmarried. You can't stand the thought of anyone else entering this house and challenging your authority.'"[48] In exposing the personal stakes of Amma in the family's distribution of power, as well as the tacit understanding that their economic assets need to be safeguarded at all costs, Anita transgresses the inviolable rules that govern the family's affective economy: in so doing, the narrator prophetically suggests, she "had outdone herself when it came to suicidal forthrightness."[49] Indeed, the same day Anita leaves for Hyderabad where, as the characters' conversation in the last pages unambiguously suggests, she will be murdered. Yet, Anita's irruption into the discursive space is crucial not only because she brings to the fore the family's unspoken consensus—based on "selective acts of blindness and deafness"[50]—but also because she represents the tangible reminder of a sense of precarity that haunts the family throughout the novel.

In framing precarity not as a momentary situation or an exception, but rather, in Gabriel Giorgi's apt phrasing, as "a constitutive condition of subjectivity"[51] under neoliberalism, *Ghachar Ghochar* further registers the social and affective impact of neoliberalism in semi-peripheral spaces. There are two episodes in the first part of the novel—when the family has to rely solely on Appa's salary as a salesman—in which the condition of precarity, resulting from the lack of labor rights and the disappearance of networks of social care, emerges as the defining condition of the family's economy and self-perception. The first time is when, because of a counting mistake, Appa discovers a discrepancy of eight hundred rupees, a sum that could completely ruin them. Although the mistake is spotted, the lingering sense of being on the verge of catastrophe remains. And indeed, a little later, Appa is forced into early retirement after his company's distribution system is outsourced and the union is bribed into compliance. As larger dynamics of neoliberal transformations encroach into the microeconomy of the family, the novel envisions a possibility of social redemption in Sona Masala—a business venture whose launch is described in almost mystical terms. As soon as they flee from the class of exploited laborers to join the wealthy upper middle-class, however, the sense of precarity (previously due to the absence of labor rights and of state-provided safety nets) comes to be associated with the specter of downward mobility. This potential catastrophe is evoked multiple times by Anita, who (in the previously quoted passage, for instance) had disclosed the real motive behind the family's treatment of Sushaini, as well as by the narrator, terrified by the mental instability of the other owner of Sona Masala, Appa, who has not yet written a will and could "become ruinously entangled in some philanthropic enterprise."[52] The same sense of precarity that bonds the family against external threats becomes for the inept narrator—who earns a salary without performing any kind of work—an existential incapacity to embrace the neoliberal rhetoric of hard work and intelligent investment of capital. This ineptitude is further framed, in line with neoliberal-patriarchal dogmas, as a threat of emasculation: in being incapable of fulfilling the role of the male provider, the narrator accepts instead to "[live] off alms"[53]

48 Shanbhag, *Ghachar Ghochar*, 99.
49 Shanbhag, *Ghachar Ghochar*, 100.
50 Shanbhag, *Ghachar Ghochar*, 100.
51 Gabriel Giorgi, "Improper Selves: Cultures of Precarity," *Social Text* 115.31 (2013): 71.
52 Shanbhag, *Ghachar Ghochar*, 23.
53 Shanbhag, *Ghachar Ghochar*, 90.

in exchange for a passive acquiescence to the family's power structures. Once again, the integration between traditional hierarchies and neoliberal modernity is revealed in the gaps of his own myopically focalized account.

Formally, *Ghachar Ghochar* relies on stylistic concision and restricted focalization to illuminate the ideological motives and forces that the narrator is unable or unwilling to detect as they operate within his family and in broader socioeconomic dynamics. Yet, the formal options available to semi-peripheral writers are as varied as the cultural and literary contexts that animate their writing. Nicola Lagioia, who has dedicated his intellectual and writing career to exploring the social transformations of southern Italy in its transition to the most ruthless and environmentally devastating neoliberalism, writes *La Ferocia* with specific formal and literary models in mind. There is certainly the French realist tradition of Balzac and Flaubert—hence an expansive, florid style. But there is also the influence of the southern Italian school of realism, from Giovanni Verga to Tomasi di Lampedusa, particularly in Lagioia's acute interest for the Italian South as a social totality whose contradictions cast light on the history of the nation as whole.

Both *Ghachar Ghochar* and *La Ferocia* use the family unit as a central matrix that the novel has traditionally used to scale up to societal questions. Yet, if Shanbhag chronicles an upward trajectory, Lagioia focuses on the unavoidable demise of the wealthy and corrupt Salvemini family as an allegory of a South that has chosen ferocity as its main economic, social, and ethical drive. Most importantly however, both novels are animated by the same urge to theorize the semi-periphery from a position that is as invested in its harshly contradictory realities as it is determined to point to their historical and political causes. In other words, Lagioia and Shanbhag understand the semi-peripheral South as a totalizing horizon of meaning-making, yet one that is not framed against a modernity coming from the North—neither as a belated arrival nor as a radically alternative option. Instead, these spaces are integral parts of a globally experienced condition of capitalist modernity and, as areas that have been progressively peripheralized to sustain systems of unequal accumulation, they find themselves in structurally homologous positions of marginality. Therefore, on the one hand, contextual circumstances and specific literary repertoires push toward different formal outcomes; on the other, spatial homology and particularly intense socioeconomic inequalities allow these texts to capture the divergent elements intersecting in the constitution of a global neoliberal present.

La Ferocia begins in medias res with a young woman walking on the roads of a residential neighborhood in Bari "naked, and ashen, and covered in blood."[54] The scene, narrated in a cinematographic style as a continuous long take, introduces the absent center of the novel—Clara, who will be later found dead at the foot of a parking structure—and sets the generic and literary coordinates that will guide the rest of the narrative.[55] As reviewers have rightly noticed,[56] *La Ferocia* is part noir thriller (propelled by the

54 Lagioia, *Ferocity*, 17.

55 For an analysis of Lagioia's cinematic style, see Quattrocentoquattro, "#Strega 2015. Nicola Lagioia, *La ferocia*," *404: file not found*, June 19, 2015 (quattrocentoquattro.com/2015/06/19/strega2015-nicola-lagioia-la-ferocia/).

56 Sebastian Sarti, "Modern Italy Is a Corrupt Dystopia in 'Ferocity,'" *Chicago Review of Books*, November 10, 2017 (chireviewofbooks.com/2017/11/10/ferocity-nicola-lagioia-review/); Deborah E. Kennedy, "Paving Paradise: The Beauty and Terror of Nicola Lagioia's 'Ferocity,'" *Los Angeles Review of Books*, October 18, 2017 (lareviewofbooks.org/article/paving-paradise-the-beauty-and-terror-of-nicola-lagioias-ferocity/#).

mystery of Clara's death), part family saga, and part psychological drama. Drawing on detective novel tropes and structures, but deploying high literary markers aimed at distinguishing his novel from genre fiction, Lagioia accumulates multiple generic and formal layers in order to articulate a socio-historical diagnosis of four decades of neoliberalism in the Italian South, from the massive economic growth of the 1980s to the progressive destruction of its social fabric and ecological diversity.[57] He does so by centering the narrative on a the Salvemini family and the networks of minor characters that gravitate around it; in this way, the novel envisions a dynamic and intricate social totality whereby the narrative thread moves seamlessly from the political elites and entrepreneurial upper middle class to the urban *lumpenproletariat* of the city of Bari. Lagioia's acute focus on the vicissitudes of the Salvemini family is thus a structural device the allows him to open the narrative to wider social and historical forces intersecting in the Italian South. When Clara is found dead, her father and family patriarch Vittorio, who has climbed the social and economic ladder as a ruthless real-estate developer, is under investigation for corruption. The first section offers a complex portrait of the family: Annamaria (Vittorio's wife), Gioia (their teenage daughter), Ruggero (the other child and a famous doctor), and Michele, the youngest child, the consequence of one of Vittorio's affairs and, like Clara, an enigmatic outcast unwilling to passively accept the family's moral corruption. As the novel progresses, Michele starts suspecting that Clara's death, officially declared a suicide, is actually a murder and embarks on an obsessive detective search that will lead to the unearthing of a massive system of violence, corruption, and *omertà*—a code of silence adopted from organized crime that is shown to be functional to the Salveminis' unregulated accumulation of capital.

Just as *Ghachar Ghochar* registers the integration of familism, gendered violence, and neoliberal entrepreneurship in the transformation of southern India and of its class and economic hierarchies, *La Ferocia* can be read as a narrative response to the transition to neoliberalism in the Italian South, a space being reconfigured by the same combination of preexisting social practices and neoliberal modernity. The Warwick Research Collective has analyzed these combinatory phenomena by recuperating the concept—first developed by Trotsky in economic analysis—of combined and uneven development, in order to describe "a situation in which capitalist forms and relations exist alongside 'archaic' form of economic life and pre-existing social and class relations."[58] In readapting this theory to cultural and literary production, WReC proposes a convincing account of world literature by stressing that the final determinants of artistic expression are to be found in the dynamic and spatially expanding development of capitalist modernity. However, their theorization falls short when they posit that only "irrealist

57 On the ways in which contemporary authors of literary fiction use tropes and plot devices from popular genres while being deeply invested in signaling the literariness of their own creations, see Jeremy Rosen, "Literary Fiction & the Genres of Genre Fiction," *Post45*, August 7, 2018 (post45.research.yale.edu/2018/08/literary-fiction-and-the-genres-of-genre-fiction/). Rosen argues that "as formal experimentation, stylish writing that avoids cliché, and social acumen are prized in the subfield of literary fiction, writers who want to adopt popular genres but gain literary prestige can strategically deploy these features, along with other literary markers such as high degree of allusiveness, a thematizing of readers and reading, and other self-reflexive attempts to distance 'serious' literary production from commerce."

58 WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development*, 11.

aesthetics"[59] can give form to the ways in which different literary spaces articulate to the irruption of capital in their specific social and cultural substratum. Both *Ghachar Ghochar*—an agile, monofocalized novella—and *La Ferocia*—a long and elaborate social epic—demonstrate instead that the "fundamental dissonance in the structure of reality"[60] engendered by combined and uneven development can be registered through a realist mode of expression. In *La Ferocia*, this dissonance leads to a peculiar framing of temporality as related to different phases of neoliberalism in the semi-peripheral South.

It is worth noting at this point that Huehls and Smith, in their discussion of the historical trajectory of neoliberalism, identify four successive phases: the economic (in the 1970s), the political-ideological (in the 1980s), the sociocultural (in the 1990s and early 2000s), and the ontological, in which we are currently living and whose central feature is the "extension of market rationality … from a way of thinking … to a way of being."[61] This taxonomy and temporal schematization, as Huehls and Smith convincingly show, helps to explain the representational shifts in the literature of the last half-century. Although its sequential structure works for British and American literature (their main field of investigation), this model cannot account for the specificities of neoliberalist transitions in world semi-peripheries. As *La Ferocia*'s articulation of time shows, the emergence of neoliberalism in the Italian South is predicated upon the juxtaposition of these phases; consequently, it is narratively articulated through structures of temporal overlapping and nonsequential repetition. Consider, for instance, how the novel juxtaposes what Huehls and Smith call the economic and the ontological phases. The former gets manifested in the continuous reference to Ilva, one of the largest and most polluting steel plants in Europe, which becomes the symbol of the system of unregulated and uneven development in the Italian South.[62] The presence of Ilva, in punctuating the narrative and in defining its historical and economic background, functions as a temporal index and interpretative key. The steel plant, a symbol of industrial capitalism that, because of the failure of the state to enforce environmental standards, has been releasing in the nearby areas carcinogenic dioxins causing a peak of lung, kidney, and liver cancer, explicitly appears in the novel only in a few instances. Yet, its social and environmental effects are everywhere, from the destruction of the social fabric of the city of Taranto (where the steel plant is located) to the death of migrating plovers and pink flamingoes, unaware that "the nourishing muddy water" of the salt marshes where they are feeding are contaminated with "such elements as cobalt, lead, manganese."[63] Ilva thus symbolizes the system of capitalist production, corruption, and environmental deregulation from which the real-estate activities of the Salvemini family

59 WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development*, 68.
60 WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development*, 65.
61 Huehls and Smith, *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, 9.
62 For an introduction to the history of Ilva and to the environmental impact of its activities, see the dossier commissioned by the European Parliament's Committee on Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (Grazia Maria Vagliasindi and Christiane Gerstetter, "The Ilva Industrial Site in Taranto," *European Parliament's Committee on Environment, Public Health and Food Safety*, 2015 [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2015/563471/IPOL_IDA(2015)563471_EN.pdf. 2015]). Ilva's violations of environmental laws and their effects on the local population had been denounced for years by Italian journalist Alessandro Leogrande, whose articles on this issue have been recently collected. See Alessandro Leogrande, *Dalle macerie. Cronache sul fronte meridionale* (Milano, Italy: Feltrinelli, 2018).
63 Lagioia, *Ferocity*, 350.

have enormously profited. At the same time, by offering a minute psychological portrait of its main beneficiary, Vittorio Salvemini, the novel also suggests that the kind of ferocity that propels his unscrupulous pursuit of wealth is a mode of being in the world, an ontological foundation tied to the neoliberal episteme that gets juxtaposed to the most immediately recognizable economic mode. In this sense, through the overlapping of the ontological and the economic phases, Lagioia suggests that the neoliberal transition in the semi-peripheral South responds to processes of acceleration and combination, which affect the thematic concerns of the novel, as well as its formal organization. Indeed, although the story is told by a canonical third-person omniscient narrator, this entity often recedes into the background and limits itself to weaving together the voices of the novel's numerous characters. Through long sections of free indirect discourse and sudden jumps in focalization, Lagioia constructs a kind of multiperspectivity whose major aim and effect is not a postmodern relativization of truth, but the nuanced registration of each and every attempt to conceal it. In this sense, the noir architecture is once again useful: most immediately, there is the truth about Clara's death that Michele finally discovers—she was beaten to death during an orgy. But on a deeper level, there is the truth of a system of political corruption, environmental devastation, and violence that encroaches on every narrative corner of the novel.

The Salvemini family therefore functions as a structuring nucleus through which Lagioia constructs what David Kurnick, writing about Elena Ferrante's imaginative world, defines as "differently scaled visions of the collective."[64] In other words, the dynamics of coercion and the moral standards that govern the family (Vittorio regularly blackmails his own children into tacitly cooperating in his illicit activities) are amplified through the implication of several other characters, whose presence contribute to building a totalizing narrative space. The novel's opening to the social collective is narratively propelled by Michele's investigation into the death of his sister—a device Lagioia strategically uses to explore the intersection of political corruption, market deregulation, and ecocidal ventures that have shaped neoliberal policies in the semi-peripheral Italian South in the last four decades. Just as Clara is the absent focal point in a web of moral depravation, his father Vittorio, the real estate mogul who has leveraged his social capital to gain access to the power cliques of Bari, is at the center of a network that spreads into every form of power, from politics (he exchanges favors with government ministers, mayors, and chairs of foundations) to culture (he sends his lackeys to threaten the chancellor of the University of Bari) to the judiciary system (he blackmails the chief justice of the courts of appeal).

By delving into these networks of power and corruption, *La Ferocia* thus draws attention to how Vittorio's real-estate empire should be seen as a synecdoche for unchecked capitalist development in semi-peripheral spaces. In doing so, the novel also reveals the functional integration of southern Italy's socio-cultural substratum with neoliberal policies of market and environmental deregulation. Consider the novel's epigraph to part 1—"Those who know say nothing, those who speak do not know"[65]—a reference to the widespread culture of *omertà* in southern Italy, a code of silence meant to

64 David Kurnick, "More Talk: A Response," *ASAP Journal*, July 23, 2017 (asapjournal.com/more-talk-a-response-david-kurnick/).
65 Lagioia, *Ferocity*, 14.

protect criminal interests from state authorities. The most accredited etymology of this word connects it to the Neapolitan word for "humility," that is, to the hierarchical structure of Mafia organizations.[66] Other theorists have linked *omertà* to the Spanish word *hombredad* ("manliness"), via the Sicilian word for "man" (*omu*).[67] In capturing the combination of a masculinity, honor, and economic interests, this etymological juncture becomes a matrix for navigating the narrative world of *La Ferocia*. It is then not coincidental that the Salveminis' downfall begins when Michele decides to break this code, forcing the director of the Regional Environmental Protection Agency to investigate into the illegal dumping of toxic waste in which his father Vittorio has been involved during the construction of a tourist village. Crucially, the director hints that the Salvemini family might just be a clog in a larger system: as he tells Michele that they will certainly find "something dirty" beneath the tourist complex, he also suggests that Vittorio might have been actually forced to accept the illegal dumping: "Didn't it occur to you that he might never have had a choice? That someone, while they were building that fucking tourist village, might have ever so politely asked him to stop the work. Just for a couple of days. Enough time to come in with an earthmover and a couple of trucks, do what they had to do, and leave."[68] Although it remains an unverifiable suggestion, the allusion to more powerful criminal powers gives a sense of the kind of totalizing framework one needs in order to grasp the intersecting forces and interests that substantiate *La Ferocia*'s world.

Formally and stylistically, this world is captured through a kind of realism that could be described with the same words Eric Auerbach used to analyze Balzac's style and literary sociology: "Every milieu becomes a moral and physical atmosphere which impregnates the landscape, the dwelling, furniture, implements, clothing, physique, character, surroundings, ideas, activities, and fates of men, and at the same time the general historical situation reappears as a total atmosphere which envelops all its several milieus."[69] In *La Ferocia*, the central milieu—or what Auerbach calls "the general historical situation"[70]—emerges in the description of the spaces that the Salvemini family inhabits and moves through, starting with their house, in which centuries of history of the Italian South are solidified, "as if the villa could rejoin," Lagioia writes, "something that reached back earlier than its own foundations: the Austrian before the Bourbons, and the Aragonese before the Austrian."[71] The adjective Auerbach uses to characterize this type of realism in Balzac is "atmospheric";[72] and indeed, with *La Ferocia*, Lagioia recuperates the Balzacian lesson in order to articulate a narrative and social atmosphere—of which the Salveminis are the most glaring and ruinous instantiation—that encompasses the economy, the judicial bodies, the public sphere, and the religious and cultural substratum. In this sense, it seems fitting that the editor of a local

66 Raffaele Corso, "Omertà," *Enciclopedia Italiana Treccani*, 1935 (http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/omerta_%28Enciclopedia-Italiana%29/).
67 Oxford English Dictionary, "Omertà," *OED Third Edition*, March 2004.
68 Lagioia, *Ferocity*, 440.
69 Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), 473.
70 Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 473.
71 Lagioia, *Ferocity*, 39-40.
72 Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 473.

magazine tells Michele that the Salvemini family is "the very incarnation of social injustice,[73]" or that a journalist who has been investigating on their shady businesses remarks that they are "one of the physiological consequences of this land."[74] Conscious of the risk of sounding outmoded yet ethically committed to pinpoint specific historical causes, Lagioia articulates a quasi-biological understanding of socioeconomic injustice.

After Michele decides to deal the final blow to his father's already crumbling real-estate empire by reporting his environmental violations, Lagioia omits to detail the family's financial downfall. The reader is thus presented with a temporal gap, a narrative ellipsis that occupies the white space between the last chapter and the "epilogue"—and this comes as a certain surprise, given the novel's intense focus on the Salvemini family and on their affective or business networks up to that point. Set in their villa, the spatial correlative to the alternate fortunes of the Salveminis, the novel's short epilogue describes the arrival of the new owners, a family of nouveau riche whose upward trajectory, Lagioia suggests, has been as sudden and hazardous as that of the previous occupants. Once again, the villa is framed as the repository and spatial instantiation of unending cycles of rises and falls: "It had been the villa of the local *podestà*. A senator had sold it in the early Seventies. Then the stroke of luck. The last owners had been caught in a scandal, and the ensuing financial collapse had forced them to get rid of it quickly."[75] This is the last oblique mention of the Salvemini family, whose destinies, Lagioia suggests, are not important anymore because they are not exceptional. Just as their accumulation of wealth was a consequence of much wider—structural, cultural, and economic—determinants, so their downfall is framed as an epiphenomenon of systemic dynamics. Their disappearance from the narrative space and the arrival of the new owners are then proofs of their ultimate dispensability within the economy of the novel. At the same time, the trajectory of the Salveminis reveals, as Mathias Nilges has argued, "the novel's ability to make legible the epistemological horizons of that which neoliberalism establishes as our new reality."[76] And because neoliberalism has historically manifested itself with greater and more disastrous clarity in areas of the world-system that were integrated through peripheralizing dynamics, the semi-peripheral novel remains the most powerful diagnostic tool for grasping neoliberalism's spatio-temporal limits and for making its social dynamics formally legible.

The peripheries and semi-peripheries of the world-system have historically been subjected to contradictory, yet highly consequential, depictions in the discursive and imaginative realms. As Franco Cassano has argued, the modern discourse about the South has been dominated by a central antinomy that characterizes it either as "tourist paradise" or a "criminal nightmare":[77] two seemingly antithetical descriptions that, he continues, "are instead complementary, for they represent the legal and illegal

73 Lagioia, *Ferocity*, 323.
74 Lagioia, *Ferocity*, 327.
75 Lagioia, *Ferocity*, 445.
76 Mathias Nilges, "Fictions of Neoliberalism: Contemporary Realism and the Temporality of Post-modernism's Ends," in *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, eds. Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2017), 108.
77 I took the liberty to translate *incubo mafioso* as "criminal nightmare"; the literal translation would be "Mafia nightmare" because Cassano is here specifically thinking about the Italian South and using the Mafia as the paradigmatic criminal organization. Franco Cassano, *Il pensiero meridiano* (Bari, Italy: Laterza, 2005), 6.

manifestation of the subaltern integration of the South"[78] into capitalist modernity. But what happens when we substitute a differential paradigm with one based on the study of how social forms respond to the same historical forces and economic conditions as experienced in different degrees of intensity? How would novel theories and contemporary literary histories change if we finally acknowledged that, as Roberto Dainotto writes, "rather than *difference*, the South [is] a concentration of conflicts and contradictions which [are] were not, however, peculiar to the South?"[79] The peripheral and semi-peripheral South would cease to be the space where backwardness and underdevelopment can be made to coexist discursively with escapist getaways to exotic paradises and become instead an index of the effects that worldwide social and economic processes have on literary form and expression.

This change of paradigm, from a differential approach to a systemic one, has three major consequences. First, it encourages the comparison of multiple Souths as areas that have been subjected to the same process of peripheralization. In *La Ferocia*, as a character is traveling through the coastal, deindustrialized landscapes around Bari, Lagioia writes: "He was crossing a no-man's land that he would have found, identical, whether leaving Taranto or venturing into the Calabrian plain. He'd have found it identical in Palestine."[80] This does not mean ignoring the contextual specificities of different Souths, nor the historically different forms of coloniality enforced in southern India and southern Italy. Rather—and this is the second major consequence of a paradigm change—it entails the recognition that the condition of peripherality is neither a geographical determination nor an essential characteristic, but the consequences of contingent historical circumstances that have shaped the interactions and hierarchies among different world regions. In Dainotto's words, the South is always "the pole of a relation" that "cannot exist, in itself, *outside* of that relation."[81] Within this dialectic, the semi-peripheral novel, because of its intermediate and dynamic position, is engaged in registering, on the one hand, the global dynamics of neoliberal development that have been responsible for the institution of this very relation, and on the other, their social, cultural, and environmental repercussions. Finally, by replacing a framework based on difference or alternativeness with one more attentive to integration and systematicity, it becomes possible to analyze how texts can register dynamics of peripheralization in spaces that have been traditionally understood as hegemonic—the Italian South of *La Ferocia* geographically and politically belongs to Europe—or in regions that are currently rising to regional dominance—as in the case of Bangalore and, from a global perspective, India. In other words, the South lives within the North not only, as critics have stressed,[82] because of increasingly intense migratory flows,

78 Cassano, *Il pensiero meridiano*, 6.

79 Roberto Dainotto, "South by Chance: Southern Questions on the Global South," *The Global South* 11.2 (2017): 49.

80 Lagioia, *Ferocity*, 386. When presenting his novel, Lagioia has reiterated the same concept, this time linking *La Ferocia*'s narrative spaces to "any South of the world" and citing the literary Souths of William Faulkner, Gabriel García Márquez, and Malcolm Lowry. See Nicola Lagioia, "Nicola Lagioia racconta *La ferocia*," *Letteratiudinenews*, October 11, 2014 (letteratitudinenews.wordpress.com/2014/10/11/nicola-lagioia-racconta-la-ferocia/).

81 Dainotto, "South by Chance," 46.

82 Caroline Levander and Walter Mignolo, "Introduction: The Global South and World Dis/Order," *The Global South* 5.11 (2011): 1–11.

but most importantly because the condition of peripherality is present and can be given narrative form anywhere unevenness is produced. In this sense, the diagnostic potential of the semi-peripheral novel rests upon a kind of productive deception, in which the South is foregrounded, in and of itself, as a self-contained totality—yet also as a necessary step for scaling up to the global frame that constitutes the novel's ultimate horizon. As Michele ponders in a passage that self-reflexively addresses the semi-peripheral novel's narrative and epistemological compass: "The South is also this deception … a part that is greater than the whole that ought to contain it."[83]

83 Lagioia, *Ferocity*, 352–53.