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Administering Nostalgia: On Leisure, Boredom, and the Raj

Monika Fludernik (2020) traces the origins of otium (leisure) native to India, and its gradual disintegration due to the contemporary work conditions that prioritize the “Western work ethic”. She writes: “Early post-Independence examples of the otium motif link the perceived lack of leisure to colonialism and to imposed British habits of industry, thus adding a clear framework of (post)coloniality to the topic... the idealization of indigenous Indian leisure should be interpreted as a reaction to globalization and its effects on the Indian (upper) middle classes”. Attempting to locate a close synonym for otium, Fludernik proposes a formal description of the word that is primarily “determined by a freedom from imposed constraints (e.g., deadlines, schedules, immediate tasks) and a freedom for a particular otium activity, or project”. She reads otium as a mode of resistance against the violent onslaught of a work ethic that is an absolute requisite of the neoliberal project. This awareness contextualises Sampath’s condition. The protagonist of Kiran Desai’s *Hullabaloo* in the Guava Orchard, Sampath wishes to escape from the violence of the world that is too much with him. Disenchanted by the promises of modernity, and frustrated with the formulaic existence, Sampath escapes into a forest to relieve his boredom. However, this relief is also short-lived, for the human world that he believed he had left behind comes to haunt his days of leisure in the forest. Sampath is finally able to transcend the clamour of existence, and inevitably that of boredom by metamorphosing into a guava. In English, August, the protagonist Agastya struggles to make sense of the civil services – a hangover of the Raj. A postcolonial subject, Agastya clings to the past, hoping that his stint as an IAS officer would allow him to reminisce the days of the Raj – days filled with a leisurely glamour. However, like Sampath, he too realises the boredom of his existence as an officer and attempts to make peace with his new understanding. Margit Pernau writes that politics “structured not only the emotion that could be voiced and how they could be expressed, but also the way they could be created or not created in the

interface of texts, spaces, objects and practices. Nostalgia has to be read against this specific context". In this paper, I consider the politics of nostalgia, and the consequent emotions of leisure and boredom as they haunt the psyches of Agastya and Sampath as an attempt to unravel the unfolding "neocoliberal" clime in India, and how it continues to be haunted by the memories of the British Raj and its administration. I am particularly interested in reading the "affectivities" of August and Sampath as residual remnants of the nostalgia for the Raj, and how these continue to influence the politics of the everyday today. What is the future of the "postcolonial affect" as it figures in these texts? How can nostalgia and leisure be read aesthetically against the memories of the Raj and its administration? What promise does the "affective turn" hold out in the texts? These are some of the questions that I will delineate in my paper by briefly referencing the writings of Macaulay and Pernau amongst others.