



HEAVEN, EARTH AND HELL AS METHOD: SOCIAL STRATIFICATION AND THE MANUFACTURED THREAT IN THE SCREEN ADAPTATION OF THE STORY OF MY ASSASSINS

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ABSTRACT :

The critical reflex that greeted Sudip Sharma's nine-episode series *Paatal Lok*, which arrived on Amazon Prime Video in May 2020, was to measure what had been jettisoned from its source: the courtroom, the narrator-journalist, the activist defence, nearly every scene of Tarun J. Tejpal's 2009 novel *The Story of My Assassins*. This paper argues that the question of what was dropped matters far less than what was carried across — and what survives, intact and reanimated, is not a plot but a problem: who gets to give testimony about those accused of attacking the powerful, and under what conditions is that testimony believed? The series translates this problem into a three-world spatial scheme — heaven, earth, netherworld — that functions not merely as social classification but as an epistemological instrument, sorting whose account arrives first, whose is credible, and whose is crushed under the weight of an official story. Four accused persons are made to carry the official narrative; their private histories — of caste violence, communal riot, sexual assault, and transphobia — constitute what the paper calls counter-archives: bodies of fact that contradict the charge sheet and refuse the conspiracy reading the state requires. The threat at the plot's centre is, the series finally reveals, entirely manufactured — assembled by local power, handed to the police, and amplified by a news channel whose appetite for a dramatic story renders it complicit in the deception. The paper closes by reading the series' controversies over community representation as the necessary cost of a method that puts social division to work as its primary analytical tool.

Keywords: adaptation studies; *Paatal Lok*; *The Story of My Assassins*; caste and class; testimony; media and the state; Indian streaming television

Introduction

How little of a source novel needs to survive for an adaptation to count as an adaptation? In the case of *Paatal Lok* (2020), the question presses with unusual force. The series carries the formal acknowledgement of debt to Tarun J. Tejpal's *The Story of My Assassins*, yet the reader who turns from Tejpal's pages to Sharma's screen encounters a drama that has redistributed its attention almost entirely. A Delhi police inspector and a television news anchor carry the central narrative weight; four accused persons and a transgender woman surface in the opening sequence before the charges against them have acquired any contextual support; and the season's second half commits its investigative momentum to Chitrakoot and rural Punjab, recovering the biographical routes that carried each suspect from a particular community to a Delhi charge sheet. The institutional architecture of the novel — its courtrooms, its activist networks, its sustained first-person voice — has been cleared away entirely. What, then, did the adaptation actually carry across?

Sharma himself is candid about this — and what he says is more instructive than it first appears. In conversation with Anupama Chopra, he explains that the novel was merely the writers' room's starting point; the project that emerged was driven by the themes that preoccupied him and his collaborators: the divides of class, language and religion, and above all caste (Chopra). That answer is telling because it displaces the usual question. The series did not attempt to reproduce the novel's events, so counting missing scenes is beside the point. The more productive question is what organising idea the series inherited from the novel, and what it constructed on top of that inheritance.

The answer proposed here is that the shared idea is not a character, a location or a strand of plot — it is a way of handling testimony. Both texts open on a spectacular accusation: a group of people has been intercepted on the way to kill a celebrated journalist. Both then turn their backs on the journalist and attend instead to the accused. Jason Burke, reviewing the novel for *The Guardian*, describes a book that reconstructs the back stories of the men charged with the conspiracy, weaves those reconstructions through the trial's progress and the narrator's entanglement with a young activist organising the defence, and slowly, uncomfortably, uncovers what brought each man to court (Burke). *Paatal Lok* keeps this fundamental movement — from accusation to biography, from official charge to private history. What it replaces is the mechanism of that movement: where the novel relies on a trial and a journalist-narrator, the series uses a policeman's investigation and what its makers call a map of three worlds.

Three arguments structure what follows. The first concerns method: the three-world scheme the series borrows from Hindu cosmology is not decorative; it is an epistemological architecture that decides whose account arrives first, whose voice is credited, and whose testimony is buried under

the weight of institutional authority. The second concerns the four accused, whose private histories function as counter-archives — accumulated facts that contradict the state's official account of the case. The third concerns the threat itself, which the series gradually reveals to be a story assembled by local power and circulated, with willing and unwilling complicity, by the national news media. Each argument rests on an adaptation-theoretical claim drawn from Linda Hutcheon and Robert Stam: that adaptation is a creative act of reworking rather than copying, and that what persists from a source text is often a problem, a structure or a mood rather than a sequence of events (Hutcheon 7–8; Stam 4).

A note on method is also due. The discussion of the novel does not rest on direct quotation from Tejpal's text; it draws instead on published reviews, on interviews with the series' makers, and on the plot record and production history of the series. The series is treated throughout as the primary object of analysis. Where claims about the novel extend beyond what the published reviews actually say, the paper flags that limit and proceeds tentatively. This restriction rules out certain comparisons — notably of prose style and narrative voice — but it suits the argument, which is structural rather than linguistic: the point is the relation between the two works, not the texture of their sentences.

Review of Literature

Scholarship on *Paatal Lok* clusters, broadly, around three preoccupations. The first treats the series as a social document — a systematic exposure of the mechanisms by which contemporary India produces its self-image at the cost of its most precarious subjects. Bhuyan, writing in *Economic and Political Weekly* (2021), reads the series as a ruthless deconstruction of the nation: narrative is manufactured, structural violence is normalised, and the categories of criminal and innocent serve the hierarchies of power rather than the facts of any particular case (Bhuyan). What is remarkable about Bhuyan's reading is that it refuses the consolation of the critique-from-outside: the series does not merely depict India, he insists; it lays bare the mechanics of national self-representation. A 2025 article in the *American Journal of Art and Design* presses this analysis along its caste axis, arguing that Tope Singh is systematically framed through victimhood, that lower-caste masculinity is criminalised in the series' logic, and that Hathiram's own caste positioning is held deliberately ambiguous — a device that makes the central investigator available to a cross-caste viewership ("Dalit Representation"). A May 2021 study situates the series within Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, arguing that the hierarchies of masculine identity the series presents are distributed along interlocking axes of class and caste.

A second strand presses at the politics of representation — specifically the question of whether a drama can be simultaneously critical of a prejudice and complicit in reproducing it. The analyses published in *The Wire* and *The Quint* in May 2020 are exemplary here. *The Quint* reports that Kabir M's storyline, in which a character conceals his Muslim name only to be swiftly branded a 'jihadi' by the investigators, holds up a mirror to the surveillance of Muslim communities in contemporary India ("Paatal Lok Mirrors"). *The Wire*'s coverage of the Nepali slur controversy forces into view the question of whether the series' writers had the standing to put a slur on screen and what obligations of consent exist toward the communities depicted ("Nepali Slur"). *The Wire*'s companion analysis, "Caste, Class and Populist Political Anxieties in 'Paatal Lok,'" situates the series within a broader political economy of fear — one in which populist anxiety is managed by redirecting it toward the marginalised.

Work on the source novel is considerably thinner and is, in the main, journalistic rather than scholarly. Extended reviews by Burke in *The Guardian* (2012) and in *Mother Jones* (September 2012) read *The Story of My Assassins* as a social panorama of India — specifically, as an immersive reconstruction of damaged lives, praised for its moral seriousness and occasionally criticised for its structural sprawl. The academic essay "Tarun Tejpal's *The Story of My Assassins*: Making Sense of Contemporary India," published in *The Quest* (2011), situates the novel within the tradition of the Indian social novel and examines how the courtroom plot frames a panorama of class, caste and violence. Adaptation theory relevant to this paper is anchored in Hutcheon's foundational account of adaptation as both process and product (2013), Stam's dialogic model (2005), and Genette's concept of hypertextuality as developed in *Palimpsests* (1997). Leitch, in "Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory" (2003), warns that fidelity criticism conflates a text's meaning with its form, assuming a single correct interpretation that an adaptation either honours or betrays (Leitch 161–63). Mittell's account of complex television (2015) frames the conditions under which serial narrative sustains social analysis across multiple episodes. And yet this body of work, taken together, does not ask the structural question this paper takes as its object: what, precisely, was transferred from novel to series, and how did the new medium's constraints and affordances shape that transfer? Thematic readings, however valuable, treat the series as a finished social text rather than as the product of a particular adaptive operation. That structural gap remains open — and this paper positions itself inside it.

Adaptation as the Transfer of a Problem

"A work that is second without being secondary" — Hutcheon's formulation is deceptively simple, but it carries a polemical charge (Hutcheon 9). Her framework begins by dismantling the vocabulary of loyalty. She proposes that what adaptation actually is — simultaneously a finished product and a live process — is best grasped as a transposition that announces its prior text, a creative and interpretive taking-hold of that text, and a sustained reworking in which the source is refracted through new conditions and new audiences (Hutcheon 7–8). Stam presses the argument further by locating the adaptive relation within a field of intertextual dialogue: any source text, he notes, opens onto a spread of realisable possibilities rather than dictating a single authorised version (Stam 4). Both claims matter here — not as theoretical decoration, but as a practical licence. *Paatal Lok* is, by its own makers' account, an adaptation conducted in the register of themes rather than events; fidelity criticism has nothing useful to say about it.

What the series carries across from the novel is not a plot — it is a problem. The problem runs as follows: when a powerful person is the stated target of violence, who gets to tell the story of those accused of it, and with what authority does that account circulate? In the novel, as its reviewers reconstruct it, this problem is worked out through a trial — a public machine for producing testimony, with fixed procedure, opposing counsel, a record, a judge. The assassins' life histories enter Tejpal's pages as material that complicates and disturbs what the court is told; and the narrator, himself a journalist, is placed in the vertiginous position of investigating the lives of people accused of wanting him dead (Burke). The novel's moral interest is in precisely that proximity — the target reading the files of those who were said to have targeted him.

A streaming series of nine episodes cannot reproduce a trial's machinery — and Sharma, by his own account, had no interest in doing so. The writers'

solution was to create Hathiram Chaudhary: a middling, unspectacular Delhi police inspector whom Sharma describes as the conduit between the journalist's world and the world of the accused (Chopra). Hathiram performs, across nine episodes, the investigative labour that in the novel is distributed between the trial process and the narrator's research. He is the instrument through which the official charge gives way to private history. This paper does not dwell on whose subjectivity takes centre stage as a result of that change — a question that deserves separate treatment. What it presses on, instead, is the mechanism: the investigation replaces the trial as the form through which testimony is gathered, and the physical movement of the investigation becomes a journey downward through the social order. That journey is what the three-world scheme makes legible.

Table 1 sets out the principal structural differences that can be established from the sources used here. Its left column rests on reviewers' reconstructions of the novel; its right column rests on the series. The caution already noted applies: claims about the novel that exceed what the published reviews say are marked as tentative throughout.

Table 1. Structural comparison of the novel and the first season of the series, as established from the sources used in this paper

Feature	The Story of My Assassins (as reviewed)	Paatal Lok, season 1
Starting point	A plot to kill a senior journalist, who is also the narrator (Burke)	A plot to kill a television journalist, Sanjeev Mehra, in which four people are arrested at the outset ("Paatal Lok, Wikipedia")
Main device for reaching the accused	The progress of a trial and the reconstruction of each accused man's life (Burke)	A police investigation led by Hathiram Chaudhary and Imran Ansari ("Paatal Lok, Wikipedia")
Who is accused	Men charged with the plot (Burke)	Vishal "Hathoda" Tyagi, Tope Singh, Kabir M and Mary Lyngdoh ("Cheeni") ("Paatal Lok, Wikipedia")
Organising metaphor	Not identified in the reviews consulted	Swarg, Dharti and Paatal: heaven, earth and the netherworld (Chopra)
Role of state security	A Pakistani intelligence role that the reviewer finds only partly convincing (Burke)	A terrorist plot that police and the CBI are shown to have invented as a cover-up ("Paatal Lok, Wikipedia")

The Three Worlds as a Method of Sorting Testimony

Sharma, in the Chopra interview, articulates the three-world scheme with unusual directness: the themes of class, language, religion and caste, he says, were distilled into the idea of three Indias — Swarg Lok, Dharti Lok and Paatal Lok; heaven, earth and the netherworld (Chopra). He then offers a concrete illustration of what this means socially: an India absorbed by the correct dress code for a video interview sitting beside another India that walks a thousand miles to reach home, the two colliding now and again in forms that expose the distance between them. Translated into the city's concrete geography, these registers acquire specific coordinates — Lutyens' Delhi carrying the weight of Swarg, Vasant Vihar occupying the Dharti register, and the eastward reaches beyond Jamna Paar marking the terrain of Paatal. What Lefebvre calls perceived space — the city as it is sensed, traversed, and assigned value through social practice — maps almost perfectly here onto social position, making geography and class practically indistinguishable (Lefebvre 38–39). Character placements within this scheme follow from the present author's reading of the season's episodes, guided by Sharma's description in the Chopra interview. Figure 1 schematises this arrangement, with the explicit caveat that the character placements represent the author's interpretive reading of the series rather than any cartography issued by its makers.

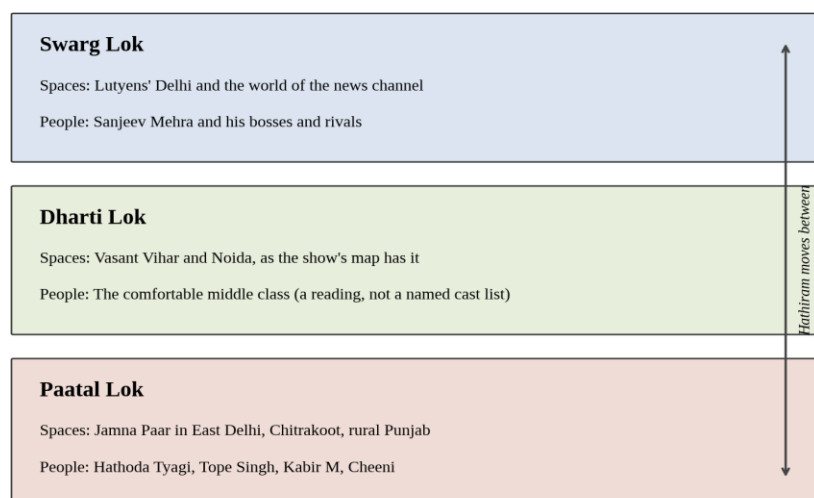


Figure 1. The three-world scheme of Paatal Lok and the position of the principal groups of characters. The spaces follow the makers' description and the production summary cited in the text; the characters are placed by the author's reading. The arrow shows the investigator's movement across the layers.

What is distinctive about the three-world scheme is not that it sorts characters — any taxonomy does that. What sets it apart is that it operates as a method: it tells the narrative how to proceed, not merely where to put people. The series exploits this methodological potential in at least three interlocking ways, each of which does something to testimony that neither decoration nor metaphor could accomplish.

First: the scheme determines the sequence in which information arrives. The heavenly world appears before anything else — Sanjeev Kumar Mehra is established as a person of consequence before a single word has been said about the men who are supposed to have wanted to kill him. The netherworld announces itself through the arrests. And then the season reverses the implicit order of importance that this opening had installed: because it is Hathiram who moves, the heavenly world is progressively seen from below, and the netherworld is seen up close. This is not coincidental. Sharma's own description of Hathiram — that the inspector looks at the viewer's world through his own eyes rather than the other way around — makes the inversion explicit (Chopra). The sequence of revelation is also a sequence of revaluation.

Second: the scheme transforms the physical journey into a social one — and, to borrow Lefebvre's term, into a spatial one in the fullest sense. The journey is not simply a narrative device: when Hathiram travels from a Delhi police station to the hinterland of Chitrakoot, and when Imran Ansari retraces Tope Singh's route back to rural Punjab, the series enacts Lefebvre's foundational claim that every location is the sedimented product of the social relations that have moved through it — and that to understand a place is to recover those relations from the concrete forms they have been given (Lefebvre 26). The series gives each location a distinct social metabolism. The crime in Delhi turns out to have its roots in a feudal and criminal order in the Chitrakoot region — a local government of a parallel kind, complete with its own politics and its own enforcers. Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope captures something of what is happening here: the series cannot tell its story about caste, class and violence without the specific places in which these structures took shape, and the places themselves are unintelligible without the historical time encoded in them (Bakhtin 84).

Third — and this is where the scheme becomes most interesting for the paper's argument — it assigns credibility. In the heavenly world, a statement is believed because of who delivers it. In the netherworld, a statement is disbelieved for exactly the same reason. The series makes this structure visible early: the four arrested people are, in the first instance, worthless as sources; their words count for nothing to the investigators or to the media. Hathiram's work — the labour that constitutes the season — consists largely of finding alternative routes to what happened, routes that do not pass through the institution's refusal to listen. This is precisely the point at which the idea of the counter-archive becomes analytically necessary, and the next section develops it at length.

That the three-world scheme is a borrowed idea, and a cosmologically loaded one, is worth dwelling on. Heaven, earth and the netherworld are categories drawn from Hindu cosmological thought, and to apply them to social class is to suggest a hierarchy in which position is, if not divinely ordained, then at least structurally fixed. Sharma himself links the image to caste, noting that a person can exit a class position but cannot exit caste — an observation he offers as though it were merely descriptive (Chopra). B. R. Ambedkar's argument, of course, is that caste is a system of graded inequality that reproduces itself precisely because it presents rank as natural, as something that transcends social arrangement (Ambedkar). The series does not advance Ambedkar's political argument, and it would be reductive to suggest that it does. But its choice of a cosmological metaphor for social division is consistent with a structural understanding of caste — one that reads hierarchy as infrastructure rather than as accident. The danger, which the section on controversy will return to, is that a metaphor of this kind may inadvertently present the structure as permanent and therefore unalterable.

The Four Accused as Counter-Archives

Both the novel and the series locate their moral weight in the same place: the lives of the accused. In the novel, according to Burke's reconstruction, those lives take up much of the book's substance — the back stories of the men charged with the plot are what Tejpal's narrative is, in effect, about (Burke). In the series, they constitute the second half of the season. The formal difference matters enormously. Because the series is structured as a police investigation rather than a trial, the accused cannot simply narrate their own histories: those histories must be excavated — by Hathiram, by Imran Ansari, by the investigators' contacts in Chitrakoot and Punjab. And the form of each excavation turns out to be as revealing as the content.

The series assembles the counter-archive of all four accused across episodes three through nine. Hathoda Tyagi's file, when Hathiram finally constructs it, opens on an act of violent justice that the school's institution could not deliver: a boy who took a hammer to the classmates who had assaulted his sisters. The criminal patronage network that absorbed him afterward was simply the first organisation that found his capacity for force useful rather than threatening (*Paatal Lok*, "A History of Violence"). Tope Singh's departure from his Punjab village does not register in any official record — caste conflict, the series implies, produces displacements that leave no paperwork (*Paatal Lok*, "The Past Is Prologue"; "Badlands"). Kabir M has arrived in the police files under a name that has already been translated — the Muslim name suppressed, a secular replacement in its place. What the investigation recovers is that the translation is biographical as much as nominal: his brother died in communal riots; his family had learned the economy of invisibility; and his father, in one of the season's most precisely calibrated scenes, refuses the investigators' insistence that radicalisation is the self-evident reading (*Paatal Lok*, "Sleepless in Seelampur"; "Of Fathers and Sons"). Cheeni enters the official record under the name Mary Lyngdoh — a misregistration that is less bureaucratic error than institutional reflex, the state's preference for legibility over identity. She is a transgender woman whose biography accumulates exclusions: orphaned, vagrant, a survivor of childhood assault. The savings she had accumulated — carefully, privately — toward a life she had planned for herself are the series' most precise emblem of aspiration under conditions designed to foreclose it (*Paatal Lok*, "Sleepless in Seelampur"). Table 2 sets these four histories against the social axis each one exposes and the institutional use — and erasure — made of each.

Table 2. The four accused: private histories, social axes and institutional uses (compiled from season 1, episodes 3–9, *Paatal Lok*)

Accused	Private history revealed	Social axis exposed	Use made of the accused by the official account
Vishal "Hathoda" Tyagi	Killed three classmates as a schoolboy after the assault on his sisters; later a hitman for a local criminal order	Violence against women and the failure of protection in rural settings	Arrested as one of four plotters; the plot is later shown to have been arranged so that he would be encountered by the police

Accused	Private history revealed	Social axis exposed	Use made of the accused by the official account
Tope Singh ("Chaaku")	Fled his village in Punjab after caste conflict	Caste hierarchy and its violence	Recruited by an intermediary through a shared past, then cast as the plot's organiser
Kabir M	Had his Muslim identity; family hit by communal riots, brother killed by a mob	Communal violence and suspicion of Muslims	Offered up as the "jihadi" element of a terror story
Mary Lyngdoh ("Cheeni")	Orphaned, abused as a child, working to save money; moved to the men's cells once her identity was known	Gender identity, child abuse and regional prejudice	Added to the group to give the plot an appearance of range

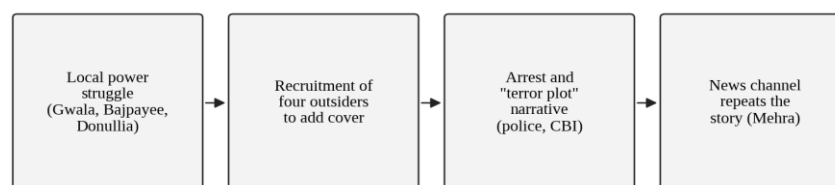
What these four histories share is not violence — though violence runs through each of them. What they share is contradiction. The charge sheet presents four people as members of a single organised conspiracy. The histories show four entirely separate lives, formed in different places, by different pressures, and joined only by the circumstance that someone needed bodies to fill a narrative. The counter-archive is therefore not a simple alternative account of the case; it is a set of facts about each person that makes the official story impossible to sustain without active suppression. The answer the series gives is unambiguous: the conspiracy is not a flaw in the state's account; it is the state's account.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question — whether the subaltern can speak — is relevant here, but requires careful handling. Spivak's essay locates the difficulty not in muteness but in the architecture of reception: when the colonised or the impoverished are relayed through an intermediary, the intermediary's own position — shaped by the same power relations that produce the subaltern's marginality — inflects the account being carried (Spivak 287). To invoke Spivak at full force: the subaltern finds no speech not for want of language, but because the institutional channels through which speech becomes legible are organised, structurally, to refuse her address. The accused in *Paatal Lok* occupy a position that resembles this. Their stories reach the viewer only because Hathiram finds them. Hathiram is a limited and sympathetic intermediary — a man pulled between the authority of his badge and the humiliation of his rank — and the series is careful not to let him speak fully for the accused. Cheeni's childhood friend comes forward on her own terms; Kabir M's father is given space to deny the police reading in his own voice (*Paatal Lok*, "Sleepless in Seelampur"; "Of Fathers and Sons"). Even so, the larger structure is one in which the lives of the most exposed characters are made legible through a figure of intermediate power. To note this, as Spivak does, is not to condemn the series; it is more accurate to say that the series stages the problem honestly — and that its staging is candid about the limits of the intermediary (Spivak 308).

And yet this is precisely where the series avoids its most obvious temptation. A weaker version of this story would use the private histories as sociological exculpation — showing that each of the four was driven to violence by the injustice visited upon them, and so converting the counter-archive into a plea for sympathy. *Paatal Lok* refuses that move. Tyagi's acts of violence are shown without softening. Tope Singh's past involves killing. The histories explain; they do not exonerate. What they accomplish is narrower and more durable: they make it impossible to treat the four accused as interchangeable props in a story about a journalist's danger — which is precisely what the official account requires them to be. That impossibility is not innocence. It is, however, justice of a kind.

The Manufactured Threat: Police, State and the News Channel

Of all the transformations the adaptation makes, none is more decisive than the one it performs on the threat at the plot's centre. In the novel, as Burke notes, the assassins are said to be part of a conspiracy involving Pakistani intelligence — an element the reviewer finds less than fully convincing as the narrative develops (Burke). In the series, the equivalent move is a terrorist theory that Hathiram and Imran Ansari refuse to credit from the outset. By the season's final episode, the plot record makes plain what the investigators have pieced together: the terror plot is a fabrication. Balkishan Bajpayee, a local politician, arranged for Tyagi to be encountered by the police; he recruited three additional people to give the arrests the look of a coordinated conspiracy; and he relied on the police and the CBI to generate the non-existent terrorist narrative (*Paatal Lok*, "Swarg ka Dwaar"). Figure 2 maps this chain of production and circulation.



What the public receives is the last box; the first box is recovered only by the investigator.

Figure 2. How the threat is made and circulated in *Paatal Lok*, season 1. The sequence follows the season's plot record cited in the text; the diagram is the author's simplification.

The shift this represents is not merely plot-level — it is epistemological. A threat that begins as an attack on an important person is reread, in the series' final movement, as a story that was assembled in advance for the benefit of local and national power. The target, it turns out, is almost incidental. When Hathiram tells Mehra that he was never the intended target, that his name was selected more or less randomly to anchor an arrangement, the revelation is registered by the journalist as an injury to his ego — and he decides, accordingly, to keep promoting the terrorist theory and to claim that Tyagi's death was a suicide to prevent testimony (*Paatal Lok*, "Swarg ka Dwaar"). The journalist who might have exposed the manufactured story ends up reproducing it. No accident, this.

The series is most illuminating, in this section, when it treats the news channel not as a backdrop but as a character — a participant in the chain rather than a bystander to it. Mehra is a famous anchor who has been losing influence, who craves a fresh claim on public attention, and who is caught in conflict with his bosses and with a former rival. A conspiracy against his life serves his career with remarkable convenience. The series does not claim that Mehra manufactured the threat — it would be too reductive to read it that way. What it shows is something more uncomfortable: that the media's appetite for a dramatic story and the state's appetite for a convenient one reinforce each other so efficiently that a false account gains momentum from people who have different and mutually ignorant reasons for wanting it to be true.

Jürgen Habermas's account of the public sphere provides the theoretical frame that most often frames this kind of situation — and the series constitutes, among other things, a fictional demonstration of the critique Habermas himself already registered. What Habermas identifies as the public sphere's constitutive function — citizens engaging in rational-critical exchange that holds power to account through open deliberation — is rendered inoperative when the media that ought to sustain that exchange converts public attention into a resource for its own circulation (Habermas 27; 181–95). The channel's news does not scrutinise the working of power; it participates in it. And yet the series refuses the consoling narrative that all media is equally captured. Local journalists in Chitrakoot appear as sources who relay cryptic leads to Hathiram — suggesting that a different, more modest, less glamorous form of journalism persists below the level of national television (*Paatal Lok*, "The Past Is Prologue"). The contrast between the two kinds of media worker is itself a form of the three-world scheme, replicated within the media system.

Partha Chatterjee's concept of political society sharpens this picture considerably. Chatterjee argues that large sections of the Indian population relate to the state not as rights-bearing citizens within a Habermasian civil society but as populations to be managed — groups that negotiate their claims informally, whose entitlements are conditional rather than guaranteed, and whose political existence is mediated through the calculations of local power (Chatterjee 38–41). The Chitrakoot arrangement the series depicts — in which a criminal order, a regional politician and the local police sustain one another through mutual dependence — is an exaggerated but recognisable figure of this world. The most unsettling moment in the plot arrives when Hathiram's superior tells him, upon reinstating him, that his suspension has been lifted as a reward for keeping this system intact, that the system works for the people of the area (*Paatal Lok*, "Swarg ka Dwaar"). The statement is a defence of arrangement against law. The series offers it without ironic comment. The viewer is left to decide whether that silence is honest or complicit.

The Ethics of Partial Knowledge

If the threat is manufactured and the state is complicit, what remains for the investigator? The question is not rhetorical. The series' answer is a deliberately restrained and unheroic ending — one that refuses every available fantasy of closure. Hathiram learns the truth. He is allowed to keep his position on the force. He is in no position to bring the system down, and he does not try. The final episode finds him on an ordinary family outing; he tosses the remainder of his ice cream to a stray dog — a gesture that critics have read as an echo of Yudhishtira's dog in the Mahabharata, the animal that follows him toward heaven and that he refuses to abandon (*Paatal Lok*, "Swarg ka Dwaar"). In the epic, that refusal is the measure of Yudhishtira's moral seriousness. The series uses the allusion to give its three-world scheme a moral exit: if the heaven of Lutyens' Delhi is populated by people who have forgotten what they owe to others, then a small and unrewarded kindness is itself a kind of heavenly conduct — offered, pointedly, to a stray.

This ending is the series' most humane gesture, and its most vulnerable to criticism — at the same time. As a gesture of restraint it is entirely serious: it declines the heroic-cop fantasy, insists that the system will survive Hathiram's knowledge of it, and offers, in place of triumph, a private decency. One might read this as a form of tragic realism — an acknowledgement that individuals with partial knowledge and limited power are rarely in a position to undo structural arrangements. Yet the objection remains: a private decency is a thin answer to structural violence. The series has shown, with clarity and force, that the threat was manufactured by power — and then it declines to follow that finding anywhere political. Whether this restraint is earned realism or comfortable resignation is a question the series leaves genuinely open, and not by accident.

The question loops back to the first claim made in this paper. If the three-world scheme sorts testimony — establishing whose account arrives first, whose is credited, whose is crushed — then a narrative built on that scheme can make the injustice of the order visible. It cannot, by itself, alter the order. The method is diagnostic; its reach is analytical rather than transformative. What the viewer takes away from the series is not a programme but a disposition — a form of attention. The habit of asking who has been made to carry the story and who benefits from its telling is not nothing. It is not everything, either.

The Limits of the Method: Representation and Controversy

Any honest reading of the series' handling of social stratification must also account for the objections it generated — and they were substantial. These objections entered the public record through distinct institutional routes. The deployment of a slur against Nepali-origin women prompted Indra Hang Subba, a Sikkim MP, to write formally to the Information and Broadcasting Ministry; the All Arunachal Pradesh Gorkha Youth Association escalated its complaint to the National Human Rights Commission on 18 May 2020, together recasting the question from artistic intent to community harm ("Nepali Slur"; "Paatal Lok Row"; "The All Arunachal Pradesh"). BJP MLA Nandkishor Gurjar's objection — that his photograph had been incorporated without authorisation, accompanied by his characterisation of the series as anti-national — converted a grievance about image use into a charge about national loyalty; the Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee's demand for a ban, premised on the view that a scene depicting a

Sikh character committing sexual assault impugned the wider community, raised the further question of whether fictional attribution can be transferred from an individual character to the collectivity from which that character is drawn. These controversies, along with further objections, were documented in the *Indian Express* (Pillai) and in *The Guardian*'s profile of the series ("Paatal Lok: Bollywood's Most Controversial").

These objections expose a structural tension that no procedural care can fully dissolve. A narrative committed to exposing discrimination must portray the discriminated and the discriminators — and in doing so it may reproduce the very stereotypes it sets out to criticise. The slur controversy is the clearest instance of this tension: the series intended the word to register the violence of prejudice as prejudice, but the communities against whom it was deployed objected to the fact of its sounding on screen, regardless of the dramaturgical framing. The question of whether the ends justify the means is not one the series can answer from within its own logic — because the people most affected by the means were not the ones who decided to deploy them. It would be reductive to treat this as merely an oversight. It is a condition of the medium and the method.

In terms of adaptation theory, this is precisely the case where the screen's reach amplifies a difficulty that the novel's form could, arguably, have contained. A novel read by a self-selecting readership can sustain a prejudice on the page for hundreds of pages, with a narrator's ongoing commentary to contextualise and complicate what is shown. A streaming series reaches a mass audience, distributed across multiple languages and cultural contexts, with no commentary except what each viewer brings. Sharma's choice to present the accused without a narrator's guidance was dramatically powerful and ethically productive — it removed the intermediary voice and trusted the viewer's reading. It also carried a communicative risk that the novel's more contained form did not. That the two problems — creative ambition and representational responsibility — cannot be cleanly separated is not an argument against the series. It is a reminder that the social categories the series uses as its working method are not fictional constructs; they are live, injured, and inhabited by real communities whose consent was not sought.

Conclusion

What does *Paatal Lok* take from *The Story of My Assassins* when it keeps almost none of the plot? The answer this paper has developed is: a problem, a structure, and a mode of attention. The problem is the perennial one of testimony under conditions of unequal power — who gets to tell the story of those accused of attacking the powerful, and what institutional machinery determines whether that account is believed. The structure is the three-world spatial scheme that Sharma borrows from Hindu cosmology and presses into service as an epistemological method — an architecture that sorts characters by what they are allowed to say and to be heard saying. The mode of attention is the movement from accusation to biography, from official charge to private history, that both the novel and the series pursue through different instruments: in the novel, through a trial and a narrator's research; in the series, through a policeman's investigation and a social map.

Three larger conclusions emerge from this analysis. For adaptation studies, the case supports Hutcheon's and Stam's insistence that fidelity is the wrong criterion and that what matters is structural reworking — and it adds a specific formulation: what is transferred in a successful adaptation may be a social problem rather than a story, a method of attending to injustice rather than a sequence of events. For the study of Indian streaming television, the paper shows how a long-form serial can appropriate the conventions of the crime thriller to build a sustained social analysis — while simultaneously raising, through the controversies the series provoked, the unavoidable question of who is entitled to portray whom and on what terms. For the interpretation of the series itself, the paper suggests a way of holding its acclaim and its controversy together: both are responses to the same central feature — the series puts social division at the centre of its method, and so earns both the recognition of those who see that division clearly and the objection of those who find themselves on the wrong side of its representation.

The limits of what has been argued here must be acknowledged honestly. The comparison with the novel depends on published reviews and extended journalistic accounts rather than on a close reading of Tejpal's text; a full study would need to test the structural claims against the novel's prose directly. The analysis of the series paraphrases its episodes and cites them by title rather than by dialogue quotation or runtime marker — a limitation that is deliberate but real. The second season of the series (2025) has been set aside entirely, and a comparative study of both seasons would almost certainly illuminate how the three-world scheme develops — or fractures — under the pressure of a new narrative. These gaps mark the directions in which this inquiry must be extended, not the point at which the central claim collapses. That claim is this: the lasting value of this adaptation lies not in its fidelity to the source and not in its drama, however compelling, but in its way of organising what can be said, and by whom, about a crime — and about the society in which the crime is always, already, a political act.

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