Not that this inward amazement of Dorothea’s was anything very
exceptional: many souls in their young nudity are tumbled out among
incongruities and left to ‘find their feet’ among them, while their elders
go about their business . . . That element of tragedy which lies in the
very fact of frequency, has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emo-
tion of mankind; and perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it.
If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would
be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat, and we
should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is,
the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity.1

I begin with one of the most famous passages in English fiction in
order to define from the start what generations of readers have taken
as George Eliot’s moral vision in Middlemarch—a vision exemplified
not just in eloquent authorial asides like this one, but in the novel’s
design, subject, and expanded point of view. The sentences contain
several hallmarks of European literary realism: a bold reversal of the
classical hierarchy of genres in order to favor the ordinary and humble;
an intellectually serious focus on everyday life; an ironic conjunction of
romantic expectation and mundane disappointment. The famous fig-
ure of the squirrel’s heartbeat similarly refigures the traditional object
of sublime response, not as a spectacle vast, grand, and rare, but as “all
ordinary human life.” No novelist could embrace such a totality, no
person could endure such awareness; but by providing an image for what lies beyond the reach of human vision and feeling, the narrator hints at our highest duty as ethical beings—and suggests for literature, if not an attainable goal, something like an ultimate horizon.

As every reader of *Middlemarch* knows, the novel elaborates a number of metaphors describing that horizon, which are primarily figures of relationship (webs, networks, tissues, the social fabric itself) and which align the work of the novelist with, among others, the work of historians and biologists. The linkage is caught in the opening sentence of the novel’s Prelude, which calls human history a “mysterious mixture” conditioned by “the varying experiments of Time” (3); by the last sentence of the novel, hundreds of pages later, we have learned that the processes of history lie in the unhistorical, and that the moral progress of the race will occur by minute accretion: “But the effect of [Dorothea’s] being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs” (515). All forms of life, the novel tells us, are connected, the humble with the mighty, the past with the present and future. To experience the microcosm of ordinary life in the provincial town of Middlemarch within the macrocosm of an immense novel, we might conclude, is to catch an echo of the vast roar of history through the synecdoche of a single volume.2

A fictional project that not only articulates but also concretely demonstrates such an inclusive vision of human connectedness belongs to a special moment in the history of literature, as Eliot’s novels do. Nineteenth-century realism, the literary tradition to which they belong, has been studied across European literatures as a specifically western tradition, and for good reasons. Our notion of intertextuality, after all, presupposes some historical continuity that makes difference meaningful within a common cultural context. There seems less reason to compare texts from wholly separate traditions, especially since, according to one reigning orthodoxy, western and nonwestern traditions are so incommensurably different as to be mutually illegible. But such a view can never challenge the assumption that the features of western tradition are uniquely western, like historicism or modernity or ideas of human dignity.

This chapter attempts to breach the practice of European comparatism by putting Eliot’s fiction into dialogue with a novel written twenty years after her death, on the opposite side of the world, in a language she never heard of. Fakir Mohan Senapati was a writer