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Editors

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Deeptangshu Das



Department of English, Dibrugarh University  
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**DIBRUGARH UNIVERSITY  
JOURNAL OF ENGLISH STUDIES  
(A UGC-CARE Listed Peer-Reviewed Journal)**



**Editors**

**Lakhipriya Gogoi**

**Deeptangshu Das**

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Dibrugarh University  
Dibrugarh, Assam**

# **Dibrugarh University Journal of English Studies**

## **Volume 29, 2020-21**

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## About the Journal

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# **OF GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT: APPROPRIATING THE PEDAGOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SCIENCE FICTION- A CASE STUDY OF H.G. WELLS'S *THE TIME MACHINE* AND MICHAEL CRICHTON'S *JURASSIC PARK***

**Goutam Karmakar**

## **Abstract**

Rather than an alternative to 'high culture' and a simple example of 'popular culture', science fiction can be taken as a discourse of multiple questions, new challenges, assumptions, invention and intervention, criticism, scepticism and new insights. While maintaining a certain peculiar and particular sense of wonder and excitement, this 'speculative fiction' remains true to scientific discoveries and principles and can be used as an amazingly powerful tool by the students to understand how the study of science can not only alter the voices of the world but also can enhance the collective capacity to change the visions of it. By taking H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine* and Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* as the point of departure, this paper attempts to show the ways by which science fiction courses can be evaluated, furnished and integrated prolifically to teach scientific facts.

**Keywords:** Science fiction, Pedagogy, Knowledge, Experience, Students

## **Introduction**

Science fiction is often politically charged and its frequent extrapolation of current scientific trends can ignite debate among students about scientific ethics, application and advocacy. The traffic between science fiction and science fact is growing and, with the proliferation of this genre in mainstream film, television and even computer gaming, it seems that, for a number of students, an interest in science may have been inspired by science fiction. To me, it makes sense to use science fiction as a tool in the teaching of science and [...] to foster student engagement and reflection. (Bowater et al 15)

Being one of the most popular literary and cultural genres, Science fiction (hereafter as SF) fascinates readers and viewers around the world. For diffusing the fear of the future and stimulating imagination and creative faculty, SF carries special importance as this medium not only generates students' alternative thinking capacity but also works as evaluating tools through which students'

thinking patterns of alternative conception are addressed. While in the textbook-heavy classrooms, students should be encouraged to read science fictions to acquire confidence in science and the capability to explore scientific facts from those, in the lecture-centric classrooms teachers can engage reluctant learners also by using Sci-Fi narratives to raise students' science-related critical thinking, critical and cognitive awareness, positive stances towards science, civic and environmental sensitivity, understanding the interconnections between technology, environment, society, culture and science and teachers can also make them think about the possible alternatives of society and future. By taking Hugo Gernsback's definition of SF as "a charming romance intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic vision" (qtd. in Westfahl 38-39) three elements can be derived namely, a thrilling or charming adventure which attracts the students to read SF, a scientific fact which allows students to acquire recent developments in science and lastly, the prophetic vision which helps the students to imagine a future by using the scientific knowledge that they get from SF. At the same time, Ken McLeod shows how despite some of the glaring implausibility and errors, questionable explanations and speculative passages, SF makes students feel at home in scientific facts. He says:

The very minimum that written sf does is to popularize the rhetoric of science, and make the language of science familiar to the reader. It valorises and validates interest in science, and stimulates thought about the consequences of new discoveries and of new applications of science. But I would go further than that, and claim that science fiction is the only form of literature that takes seriously, and communicates in a popular form, the greatest scientific discovery of all: that the universe we inhabit is vast, ancient, and indifferent. (174-175)

By taking references to "anchored instruction" and "situated learning", SF can be presented in such a way where various scientific problem-solving situations are handled authentically and realistically and by using SF as a pedagogical tool in a logical way, thought experiments and imagination of students' can certainly formulate practically safe and reasonably engaging and authentic virtual learning environment. SF can make a fruitful bonding between popular science and scientific research where non-experts can also debate. At the same time, "the construction of new knowledge in scientific laboratories leads to popular science and meditation, an in-between space in which experts and the general public can debate about science and society" (Thévenon 3). While Terence Cavanaugh and Catherine Cavanaugh (1996 15) in *Learning Science with Science Fiction Films* show how SF allows students to visualize and connect abstract concepts of science in various disciplines and Dubeck (1993 47) depicts the discovery process and pseudoscientific themes of science when SF is used as a pedagogical tool, Brake and Thornton (2003 32-33) talk about the process of creating scientifically literate citizens through incorporating SF in an undergraduate program as an applied science degree and Allday (2003 27-28) asks for a useful website where SF can be vividly explored as a pedagogical tool to explicate the wonders of science along with its physical impossibilities and

glaring errors. At the same time, Hunter (1980 10) and Cacha (1977 21) show how SF as a pedagogical tool develop students' creative work and imagination through which content knowledge and scientific concepts are communicated. Furthermore, SF also deals with certain engineering concepts which allow students to think about the numerous possibilities of technology and design. Regarding the use of SF as a pedagogical tool in the Engineering classroom, Albert E. Segall aptly says:

Sci-fi can and should be used to convey a wide range of concepts from basic mechanics all the way up to advanced design and analysis. For a number of reasons, the importance of this potential enhancement cannot be overstated. First, "sci fi's" creation of lasting images to the underlying theory can only help students through the seemingly abstract core classes of physics and mechanics. It is also hoped that a potent combination of theory and visual imagery may ultimately provide a critical nudge to help many students to "get it". Another advantage is that a visual and fun connection between concept and application may also help avoid the "disconnect" that often occurs as the curriculum initially plunges into math, physics and chemistry without a clear linkage to the vision that guided students towards engineering in the first place. (419)

The interdisciplinary approach should be taken in the classroom to show how the works of Mary Shelley, H. G. Wells, Douglas Adam, Michael Crichton and many others contain certain scientific information that can lead to latest scientific discoveries and even students from humanities background can be benefitted as Negrete and Lartigue observe: "in particular, [the results of the study] suggest that narrative information is retained for lengthier periods than factual information and that narratives constitute an important means for science communication to transmit information in an accurate, memorable and enjoyable way" (104). Furthermore, non-fiction books can also help students to acquire certain scientific facts. Here a suggested list of fiction and non-fiction books is given along with the possible research topics:

<b>Title</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Potential research topics</b>
<i>A Swiftly Tilting Planet</i>	L'Engle, M.	Nuclear development, telepathy, time travel
<i>Digital Fortress</i>	Brown, D.	Cryptography, software development, computer operating systems, cellular communications
<i>Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde</i>	Stevenson, R. L.	Pharmaceutical development, mental disorder, bipolar disorder
<i>Ender's Game</i>	Card, O. S.	Space travel, virtual reality, video gaming
<i>I am Legend</i>	Matheson, R.	Viruses, vaccine development, immunity and immunological disorders, parasitism

<i>Journey to the Center of the Earth</i>	Verne, J.	Geology, volcanoes, palaeontology, biomes
<i>Maximum Ride</i>	Patterson, J.	Genetic coding, mutation, global warming
<i>Pretties</i>	Westerfield, S.	Ecosystems, migraines, plastic surgery
<i>The Andromeda Stain</i>	Crichton, M.	Pandemics, bacteria and disease development
<i>The Host</i>	Meyer, S.	Parasitism, viruses, surgery
<i>The Invisible Man</i>	Wells, H. G.	Refractive index, invisibility, cloaking devices
<i>Hiroshima*</i>	Hersey, J.	Nuclear development, nuclear power, radiation disease
<i>Rocket Boys*</i>	Hickam, H. S.	Space travel, Newton's laws, rocks and minerals
<i>Silent Spring*</i>	Carson, R.	Ecology, adaptation, global warming, greenhouse gases, pollution

This assignment can be reworked to allow students to also read nonfiction books [marked by an \*] and develop scientific research projects (Goodwin 61).

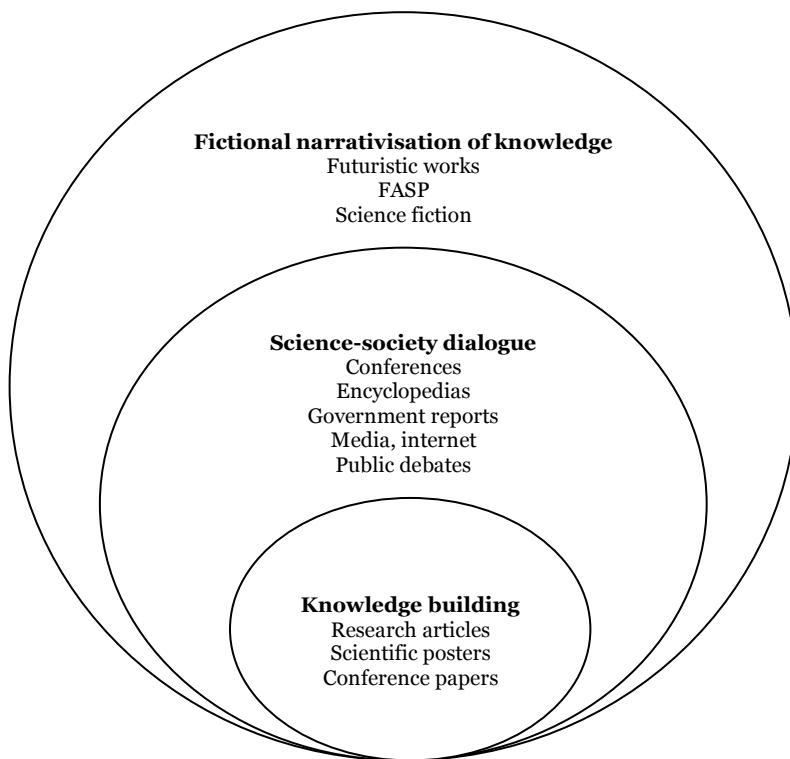
SF helps students to question science and examine communities and individuals in terms of identity, technological system and consciousness and as a pedagogical tool, it enables students to know beyond the limits of known facts through inventive and imaginative experimentation and observation. Joanna Russ aptly says in this context when she says that science fiction “attempts to assimilate imaginatively scientific knowledge about reality and the scientific method, as distinct from the merely practical changes sciences has made in our lives” (7). SF with its capability to dramatize and project generates thoughts and concern for moral, philosophical, social and cultural implications of scientific progress. It helps students to understand the pluralistic and dynamic nature and evaluation of science and it also enables students to challenge the ‘two culture myth’ by making a close connection between humanities and science. At the same time, Patrick Parrinder suggests that “up to the present, SF has continued to be moulded and shaped by scientific thought, even in its moments of rebellion against it” (67). Taking Gernsback’s definition of the term “scientification”, it can be noted that SF provides romantic stories where prophetic vision and scientific fact intermingle and these stories instruct and educate students and here Gary Raham’s observation is worth mentioning:

Today’s student can and must learn both the laws of nature already revealed by scientists and the scientific mode of thinking that will reveal new ones to survive and prosper in a future of our collective making whose borders will be staked at the limits of our imaginations. Science fiction can allow students

to test those borders and, as several fictional starship captains have said, “boldly go where no one has gone before”. (xiv-xv)

Before going to show the pedagogical significance of H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine*, and Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park*, it is needed to depict how the teaching of SF in the classroom creates an internal sphere where science and learning intermingle and here SF and domain of knowledge create a space as shown by Fries.

**Fig.1- Fries's Different spheres of scientific discourse**  
(qtd. in Thévenon 3)



### Teaching H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*

Science fiction should be regarded as a literary medium akin to science itself. Scientific methodology involves the proposition that a well-considered theory will not only explain away known phenomena but will also predict new and still undiscovered phenomena. Science fiction tries to do much the

same-and write up in story form, what the result looks like when applied not only to machines but human society as well. (qtd. in Gunn 3)

Taking John W. Campbell's views on the impact on SF on society and J. O. Bailey's definition of science fiction as "a narrative of an imaginary invention or discovery in the natural sciences and consequent adventures and experiences" (10) as the point of departure, H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895) comes up with scientific and human developments through his hero's travelling of 800,000 years into the future to discover Eloi and Morlocks, two distinguishable populations of human descendants. While the people are in Eloi group are fun-loving, pretty, small, stupid in disposition and child-like in appearance, people in Morlocks are more intelligent, look like scary white apes, eat peoples from Eloi, technologically sharp and live underground. A close reading of this SF can throw light on a few issues like time, the concept of biological species, living mechanism of those two groups, ecological and horticultural dimensions. Here students can learn the ideas of Aristotelian time, prediction and extrapolation, scientific and personal perspectives of time, and current models of stellar evolution. The story enables students to raise questions on Charles Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection as the story does not depict the future as either "grey with evolutionary perspectives" or "gay with ingenuous fore-glimpses of a renewed golden age of socialism and sentimentality" (Zangwill 40). Offering a scientific and several forms of prophecy, Wells's sophisticated vision of the future of humanity urges students to criticise the modalities of science popularisation in the late Victorian period and they can find the distance between the text and the readers created by Wells through his incorporation of the narrative of a time traveller and ultimately, the students can create a space where they critically discuss the issues related to cultural authority where the knowledge of science ascribed to proficient scientists can be communicated. Furthermore, the narrator's description in the very beginning of the book reminds the students that it is very much needed that scientific topics should be handled in a zestful way. Regarding the narrator, Wells opines: "He did not confine himself to abstract science. Several ingenious, and one or two profitable, patents were his: very profitable they were, these last, as his handsome house in Richmond testified"(1).

Regarding the concepts of morphological and biological species, students can ponder upon the questions about the productivity and crossbreeding of Morlocks and Eloi, the biological divergence between these two groups and they can do a conjectural breeding programme to get ethical yet scientific explanations and answers. Students can be asked about the isolating mechanisms that may stop hybridization between Eloi and Morlocks and here students after applying behavioural, habitat, temporal and other isolating mechanisms like their difference in size, their nocturnal and diurnal time zone, their differences in activities and intelligence, can guess the reason behind the isolation. While doing all these, students' performance can be measured in multifarious ways and assessment can be done "on whether they provide the requested three different reproductive isolating mechanisms and how well they relate the "data" from the

book plot to the scientific concepts of habitat, circadian rhythms, courtship behaviour, and morphology" (Bixler 338). Furthermore, *The Time Machine* offers opportunities to the students for interdisciplinary studies like the speculations on the class system of Victorian England during the Industrial Revolution and social Darwinism. Wells's description of the "withered flowers" can ask the students to envision the flora of the future and thus, predictions can be done on hybridization and horticultural ameliorative practices of a stilted selection in the nineteenth-century. Students can work on how by fully transforming human desires and need, plants in the future will create a perfect harmony with other species in this ecosystem. Thus, students can work on how plants can be ameliorated and propagated and here students may pay their attention to John Lindley's ethics on horticulture. The following passage from *The Time Machine* can potentially trigger students' interest in botanical studies:

Our agriculture and horticulture destroy a weed just here and there and cultivate perhaps a score or so of wholesome plants, leaving the greater number to fight out a balance as they can. We improve our favourite plants and animals-and how few they are-gradually by selective breeding; now a new and better peach, now a seedless grape, now a sweeter and larger flower, now a more convenient breed of cattle. We improve them gradually, because our ideals are vague and tentative, and our knowledge is very limited; because Nature, too, is shy and slow in our clumsy hands. Someday all this will be better organized, and still better. That is the drift of the current in spite of the eddies. The whole world will be intelligent, educated, and cooperating; things will move faster and faster towards the subjugation of Nature. In the end, wisely and carefully we shall readjust the balance of animal and vegetable life to suit our human needs. (90-91)

So, a close reading of the text will initiate understanding among students about the resilience of plants and the ecological agency of natural environment which in turn outcompete the text's human plot. Students can exercise on the symbiotic relationship between human and non-human agencies and they can also explicate horticultural implications of a human-engineered nature, future of plants and humans relationship and explores how "the novel's plants and people compete for narrative and readerly attention, in a narrative model that suggests competition within the narrative environment reflects competition in the natural world" and "in what ways the relative agency of humans and nonhumans can be parsed through a competitive narrative system" (Bowden 606-622).

### **Teaching Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park***

Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* introduces the concept of genetic engineering, biotechnology and chaos theory which symbolise the materialistic enthusiasm for creating dinosaurs and commercialisation of science. While the bioethics of *Jurassic Park* depicts how the scientists want to create a theme park of cloned dinosaurs by collecting DNA of dinosaur found in the blood of fossilized mosquitoes, gnats and ticks, the story throws lights on the cutting-edge theories

in palaeontology and thus, discusses the advance research in molecular biology. So, cloning is one of the major scientific issues that students can get exposed to through the narrative because Crichton talks on this vividly throughout the story as opined by Becker: "Long before there was a real clone, however, there were dozens of fictional clones cranked out in dozens of novels [...] perhaps the most famous are the dinosaurs in Michael Crichton's 1990 novel *Jurassic Park*" (69). At the same time, the scientists' filling in the dinosaur DNA gaps with that of frog's to intentionally create all female dinosaurs to curb the reproductive process signify the basic lack of knowledge on the part of the scientists. They failed to realise the consequences of using frog DNA that rendered engineered dinosaurs the ability of amphibians to change their sex and reproduce. Furthermore, scientists also altered and modified the dinosaur DNA to prevent them from making lysine, an essential amino acid needed as a daily supplement for them. But all these alteration and modification failed to prevent the catastrophe as the dinosaurs took over the park, typically reacting to their basic animalistic instinct as shown in the story:

The park is becoming a real Jurassic world. The animals are behaving as they did millions of years ago. The meat-eaters are killing the plant-eaters. I think the last raptors from the enclosure are in the park with the raptors who were born there. One video screen showed a group of raptors chasing some hypsilophodontids. On another screen, six raptors had jumped on a huge hadrosaur. They were biting it and cutting it with their sharp claws. The young tyrannosaur was hunting a stegosaurus. The triceratops were fighting each other. Everyone in the Control Room watched silently. (Crichton 100-101)

So, the experiment which fails and eventually causes havoc questions the bioethics of the ecosystem and the students can realise the adverse effects of scientific experiments which try to disrupt the basic order of life. They understand Chaos theory as described by Ian Malcolm in the story as some changes that are unpredictable, overtly chaotic and that bring drastic changes in complex systems. Here the novelist shows how the experiments on dinosaurs crumble their perceived order of the whole programme and here students can locate the commercialization of the chaos theory, adverse effects of creating a pure simulation or hyperreal world of lost species and flaws in Malcolm's methods as "Malcolm's insight is vindicated by subsequent events and the commercial greed that has helped to build the Jurassic Park is condemned, not simply morally, but also scientifically" (Stern 358). For saving money and increasing efficiency, Hammond depends solely on a huge computer system that automates functions and systems of that park but the significant bugs in that system symbolise the potential dangers of technology. Malcolm's mathematical calculation to depict fancy-sounding scientific lingo and his chaotic theory again indicates human's dependence on technology and students will learn that it is extremely difficult to comprehend and decipher a complex and long strand of DNA by computers. At the same time, after reading the story students have to understand the bioethical issues found in *Jurassic Park* like - should scientists

manipulate, alter and create DNA to bioengineer altered organism? Should people attempt to reform extinct species? How will people survive from the evil consequences of genetic engineering and what are the possible measures scientists have to prepare to control disasters and finally, what are the guidelines of an ethical scientific action? The students must be aware of the possibility of being perished before the annihilation of the universe. The conversation between Malcolm and Hammond in *Jurassic Park* highlights the necessity to realise the consequences of any extraordinary scientific venture and also focuses on mercenary scientists who wish to utilize their scientific skills for their materialistic gains:

'I told you that things would go wrong,' Malcolm said, 'This is a disaster'. 'There was a time when a problem like this couldn't have happened,' he continued. 'Scientists worked slowly and carefully. They learnt to be careful and make sensible decisions. Now anyone can buy powerful scientific knowledge and use it quickly and easily. And look at the disaster you have caused.' 'I only wanted to make an animal park,' said Hammond. 'You wanted to make money,' said Malcolm. 'And disasters happen if people want to get rich by using science... Don't you understand? It's possible that none of you will leave this island alive.' [...] We don't have the power to destroy the Earth or to save it. But can we save ourselves?' Malcolm smiled. (Crichton 91)

## Conclusion

Apart from being scientifically literate, students can develop an alternative conception of science through the reading and watching of science fictions because "the foremost reality that science fiction deals with is change, which could be the reason for the growing interest in the genre in the twentieth century" (Pohl 61). The students can learn scientific facts laid in the narrative structure of SF and they may get inspired for further research works and explorations on those facts. They gain knowledge about simple scientific facts even without elaborate scientific experiences and students can relate to the matter of SF and thus, stories in SF can also provide a gateway to know the present and future issues of ethical and social relevance. At the same time, SF enables students to read and think critically and as a pedagogical tool, "it is a given that the science postulated in science fiction can be a source of lessons and discussions in Science classes" (MLS 64) and a close reading of H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine* and Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* prove the fact that in a classroom, SF allows students to question, criticize, extend, formulate, invent and revise static scientific paradigms and changes in society and science. Thus, its goal is to bring out new ideas that will be true to nature and bringing SF into the curriculum, awards and degrees should be given to make students more interested in this genre and in scientific initiatives, as Mark Brake and Neil Hook aptly opine:

The intention was to inculcate in students a critical understanding of the social development of science and science fiction, as well as examining the

nature of science and its relationship with science fiction. The use of science fiction on the award should also lead to a greater understanding of issues related to the public understanding of science, particularly the social implications of science and technology, and the way in which they are represented within various forms of media and culture. (206)

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## **SUBALTERN LIVES AND UTOPIAN POTENTIALITIES IN HANSDA SOWVENDRA SHEKHAR'S *JWALA KUMAR AND THE GIFT OF FIRE: ADVENTURES IN CHAMPAKBAGH***

**Abin Chakraborty**

### **Abstract**

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, winner of Sahitya Akademi Yuva award for 2015, in his latest book, *Jwala Kumar and the Gift of Fire: Adventures in Champakbagh* offers us a utopian tale which combines some of the salient features of children's fantasy genre with the concerns of a postcolonial nation state. The narrative revolves around the sudden appearance of a small dragon in the village of Champakbagh and the way in which it becomes a part of the family life of Mohan Chander, his wife Rupa Devi and their three children. Through the virtually magical intervention of the dragon, lovingly named Jwala Kumar, the humble Chander family receives help in the form of food, fuel and even medical assistance during moments of crisis and thus acts as a harbinger of those basic amenities which still remain lacking in the lives of the downtrodden sections of people belonging to different postcolonial nations, such as India. If the utopian essence is to be seen as what Bloch defines as "anticipatory illumination", which is born out of a recognition of the consummate negation of reality, then Shekhar's Jwala Kumar certainly emerges as an embodiment of such illumination and the text becomes both a hidden polemic against hegemonic cultural artefacts such as *Game of Thrones* and a magical successor to Mahashweta Devi's "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahai and Pirtha". The paper analyses these nuances and connections, in particular with that of Devi's narrative, highlight the utopian potentialities of Shekhar's text and emphasise the way in which it challenges the conventional plots of children's literature.

**Keywords :** fantasy, postcolonial, utopian, anticipatory illumination, subaltern

The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut : beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences : it is a node within a network (Foucault 23).

Hansda Sowvendra Sekhar's latest fantasy, *Jwala Kumar and the Gift of Fire: Adventures in Champakbagh* (2018) is also a text that functions as a particular node within a fascinating network that incorporates within itself modern children's fantasies, Sekhar's own texts, globally popular cult television shows and such other significant texts as Mahasweta Devi's long story "Pterodactyl, Pirtha and Puran Sahai". It is by analysing how *Jwala Kumar* interacts with the other textual and cultural nodes in the network that one can attempt to arrive at a holistic understanding of the text and the typically postcolonial utopian potentialities it enshrines.

One of the first things which strike a reader about the world created by Sekhar in *Jwala Kumar* is its representation of stark poverty with which the Chander family, living in the small village of Champakbagh, has to contend. They do not have any electricity, their evenings and nights are marked by kerosene lanterns or the use of solar-powered lanterns given by NGO workers who have not come back and there are no paved roads near their village which is also not connected by railways. Mohan Chander, the sole bread-winner, is a daily-wage labourer who cannot afford to miss a day's work, they are heavily dependent on food grains and other items provided by the local ration shop at subsidized rates, the children are encouraged to go to school, less for education and more for the mid-day meals they will be provided with, woollen clothes are sparse in depths of winter and urgent medical assistance is non-existent. Such is the subalternised rural existence which operates as the setting for Sekhar's fantasy and this is quite in keeping with his earlier works such as the novel *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* and the anthology of short stories *The Adivasi will not Dance* both of which foreground various aspects of subaltern existence, in particular the subalternised lives of people belonging to the Scheduled Tribes, the Adivasis (Tripathi 2016; Chakraborty 2017). Although there is no explicit invocation of Adivasi identity in *Jwala Kumar*, it is possible to argue that the Chander family also represents Adivasi existence as we see the children craving for and relishing roasted rat-meat, something that caste-Hindus or Muslims or even people of other religious communities generally avoid. This feature may also refer to the abject lives of many *Musahar* families in Bihar and U.P. who belong to the lowest rung of Hindu society and are even marginalized by other Dalit families (Singh 2016).

Such a setting takes one far away from the world of opulence, power and abundance which children's fantasy narratives often concoct, even as they foster conformity with the existing socio-political structures based on varied and intersecting considerations of class, race and gender. Particularly relevant here would be such globally popular sagas such as C.S. Lewis' *Narniad*, Tolkien's *Lord of The Rings* series and Rowling's Harry Potter novels. In each case the fantasy world created by the authors is often marked by, among other things, precious rings and gems, vaulted gold, palaces and thrones and such other icons of wealth and prosperity to which the protagonists find either gradual or immediate access. Similar icons are also at work for many of the animations generated by Disney

and such other studios which end up celebrating various forms of consumerist materialism through the protagonists and their choices. As Krunoslav Mikulan observes:

Children's literature is not only not immune to traditional norms and customs of literary creation, promotion and reception, but it is at times – due to pressures from a typically white, middle-class readership – even more rigid and traditional than the mainstream. Publishers tend to produce only books that will make a profit, while editors often guide authors to devise plots and characters that correspond with common notions of a white urban readership and promote the capitalist social system and its values. (Mikulan 255)

This is precisely why Meredith Cherland, in her analysis of American children's literature, remarked that:

The canon serves the interests of those at the top insofar as it undermines resistance and makes one's place in society inevitable – therefore not to be questioned. Older Newberry winners like *Onion John* and *Blue Willow* serve both to naturalize poverty, and assign the responsibility for the relief of such poverty to kind individuals rather than social programs. More recent Newberry winners have treated racism as something caused by the attitudes of the *individual* (*Maniac Magee* for example), and poverty as the result of individual bad luck (*Shiloh*). (Cherland 124)

Such a statement emphasises how a dominant ideological structure conditions the production of children's literature as much as it shapes the production of other literary texts and artistic representations in general. Following the same logic, the world of contemporary children's literature in India also remains acutely devoid of socio-economic diversity and generally fosters a normative privileged Hindu heterosexual paradigm. Mathangi Subramanian, in an article on the lack of diversity in Indian children's literature, therefore ruefully observed:

The uniformity of those of us producing children's books translates into a uniformity in their themes. Even though most of the Indian picture books my daughter reads are written and illustrated by women, the stories star light-skinned, straight haired boys – something my dark skinned, curly haired daughter has started to notice. Her books by and about Adivasis and Dalits are often folktales or historical, as though these groups existed only in the past. The books that we have dealing with issues like poverty, disability, queerness, adoption, and loss are all titles I purchased abroad – as are all the titles that feature Muslim, queer, and Sikh characters. (Subramanian 2019)

Therefore, unlike the broader gamut of Indian postcolonial literature which thrives on the basis of its capacity to explore the lives of the marginalised and the different processes of subalternisation that wrack the postcolonial nation-state, children's literature in contemporary India has largely failed to focus on subalternised lives and the need for male children to be aware of such realities.

Michelle Superle therefore commented, during the course of her extensive survey of children's literature in India spanning two decades, that

...these novels often perpetuate a "hegemonic normality." Although critics recognise that "postcolonial literature speaks in multiple voices; it gives agency to and embraces all hitherto marginalized segments of the population—children, women, untouchables, and ethnic and racial minorities" (McGillis and Khorana 17), this is not always the case in these children's novels, which more often privilege particular values of the powerful middle class and exclude other Indian "voices." (Superle 17)

This is precisely why Sekhar's fantasy operates as such a fascinating departure from conventional paradigms and forces readers to question the limits of their own experiences. In fact, through such representations of poverty, *Jwala Kumar* creates a defamiliarised paradigm that forces the readers to confront such aspects of the Indian reality that often remain occluded from those consumerist representations which largely account for children's entertainment in today's society.

The same process of defamiliarisation is also at work in the representation of Jwala Kumar, the central character around whom the fantasy revolves. Jwala Kumar is a name that the Chander family lovingly attributes to the little dragon which is fortunately rescued by Mohan Chander on a night of torrential downpour. What is remarkable about this creature is that far from being a source of menace or terror or a hideous monster that the human protagonist must fight and defeat, as dragons generally have been in fairy tales, myths and fantasies over the years (Cressida Cowell's *How to Train your Dragon* being a rare exception), Jwala Kumar, so named for his ability to breathe fire, not only becomes a friend to the young siblings, Naren, Biren and Namita of the Chander family, but becomes a source of food, fuel, delight and even medical assistance, first to the family and eventually to the entire village at large. This entire narrative trajectory is starkly at odds with dominant representation of the dragon in western iconography where not only is it at times seen as a satanic creature in keeping with Judeo-Christian discourses but is also associated with avarice, vengeance and various forms of danger as evident from such texts as *Beowulf*, Tolkien's Lord of the Rings series, the Harry Potter Novels and a large number of related myths and legends. Sekhar is particularly conscious of the power of this hegemonic western tradition which he deliberately but subtly subverts through his own fantastic narrative. This is evident from the fact that the Chander family only becomes aware of Jwala Kumar's identity as a dragon after Biren watches a video that some of his rich classmates were watching in a big smartphone. The video in question was from some popular television show which featured a dragon breathing fire and using its flames to destroy armies after armies. The episode in question almost undoubtedly refers to the globally popular television show *Game of Thrones*, based on George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, where Danaerys Targaryen uses her dragons to conquer new lands and launches her bid to reclaim the iron throne of Westeros. In several episodes of this show

we see how the dragons who breathe fire at Danaerys' command destroy her enemies, free her from captors and destroy entire armies and navies with their lethal flames. In contrast, Jwala Kumar uses flames to light *chulhas* that stay lit for a very long time, without either firewood or dung, to kill poisonous snakes before they can bite Naren, the eldest of Mohan Chander's children, roast rats for the siblings to deliciously devour and finally to enkindle all the *chulhas* in Champakbagh as the village struggles to cope with a rare weather formation that leads to sustained unseasonal rains and bitter cold in the depths of December. Furthermore, even as Mohan Chander shivers with high fever after being drenched in the rain as he cannot avoid going to work, it is the music of Jwala Kumar that has a miraculous remedial effect and eases the worries of a family for which urgent medical assistance remained unavailable. In the process Sekhar's text becomes a "hidden polemic" against the hegemonic discourse surrounding dragons and such other supernatural creatures in the West where they mostly serve as tools of conquest, means of aggression and instruments of egotistic exhibitions of power. Bakhtin remarks:

In a hidden polemic the author's discourse is directed toward its own referential object, as in any other discourse, but at the same time every statement about the object is constructed in such a way that, apart from its referential meaning, a polemical blow is struck at the other's discourse on the same theme, at the other's statement about the same object. (Morris 107)

Sekhar's fantasy manages to achieve precisely this effect by turning the dragon into such an altruistic agent of community welfare which specifically takes into account the requirements of subalternised populations in Third World countries like India. In the process the text also becomes a wonderful example of that transformative energy which Ashcroft identified as one of the cardinal features of the postcolonial experience. As Ashcroft remarks, "Post-colonial writing hinges on the act of engagement which takes the dominant language and uses it to express the most deeply felt issues of postcolonial social experience. This form of 'imitation' becomes the key to transforming not only the imitator but the imitated" (*Postcolonial Transformation* 5). In much the same way, Sekhar's fantasy takes up the image of the dragon regularly used by western narratives and television shows and films and transforms it into an agent of collective benediction that provides the people of Champakbagh, particularly the Chander family, with those very basic amenities of food, fuel and medical assistance from which rural subaltern populations in a country like India continue to be deprived. If the logic of empire is one that insists on violence and aggression then quite naturally, a postcolonial response must be primarily directed towards solidarity, peace and welfare. One may recall in this context the remarks of Rabindranath Tagore, from an essay entitled "Barwari Mongol" (Collective Welfare), where he states:

The way in which ancient India sought to create welfare as a social foundation, even at the cost of pleasure, interest and wealth, was unparalleled. Other countries encourage everyone to indulge in competition

and conflict for the sake of prestige, profit or power. India has resisted such encouragement by all means...when we see how England, France, Germany, Russia or America are being dragged towards intense cruelty, potentially leading to terrible conflict and gradual decimation of all decency by indulging in increasing competitiveness, this competitive civilizational ethos can never be deemed as ultimate. Force, cunning and wealth may be an aspect of humanity, but are not the ideals of peace, harmony and welfare of higher value? (Tagore 154; translation mine)

Tagore's assertions, which pit European aggression and competitiveness against what he deems to be the original Indian propensity towards collective welfare and harmony, thus highlight that possibility of radical alterity which the postcolonial condition has repeatedly foregrounded. The same possibility may also be seen in Amitav Ghosh's examination of the trading cultures of the Indian ocean destroyed by European naval dominance which he represents as "aggression, pure and distilled... violence on a scale unprecedented on those shores" triumphing over "the rich confusions that accompany a culture of accommodation and compromise" (Ghosh 237). The actions of Jwala Kumar embody such an alternate perspective and the whole text therefore becomes a trenchant critique of the violence and aggression embedded in western discourses and the postcolonial need for an alternate ethic of fellowship which discards violence, war-mongering and the quest for more destructive weapons in favour of material upliftment of the downtrodden through institutional facilitation of access to basic amenities and services.

The transformative energy that allows the text to put forward such a critique operates as part of a dialogical matrix which not only takes on hegemonic western constructs but also engages with postcolonial representations of subalterneity where lamentation, induced by sustained victimisation, often plays a key role. The absence of any such modality of mourning, despite the abject absences which constitute life in Champakbagh, is particularly striking and this negation of negation also compels us to revise our understanding of such canonical texts as Mahasweta Devi's "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahai o Pirtha" with which *Jwala Kumar* is architextually related. According to Gerard Genette, architextuality refers to a relationship "of inclusion that links each text to the various types of discourse it belongs to. Here we have the genres, with their determinations that we've already glimpsed: thematic, modal, formal, and other" (Genette 82). A context of glaring deprivation combined with the presence of a supernatural or fantastic creature sets the platform for an architextual association. In Devi's narrative, the plot hinges on the appearance of a pterodactyl in the famine and starvation ridden Pirtha block of Madhya Pradesh inhabited by Adivasis who have continued to face severe deprivation of resources for decades, caused by bureaucratic rigmarole, corruption and political malaise. The pterodactyl's shadow is seen by many villagers across the Pirtha block who are terrified by the sight which they construe as a discontented ancestral spirit which has appeared in response to the plight of the Adivasis. The creature first settled in an abandoned hut of one of the villagers, witnessed and sheltered by a

boy named Bikhia who even engraves its picture on a cave wall. Puran Sahai, a non-Adivasi journalist who goes to Pirtha to investigate the phenomenon, also witnesses the creature and finds himself totally nonplussed by the incomprehensible gaze of the creature. As Devi writes:

The ancestral spirit of Shankar and his ilk gazed at Puran from beyond a barrier of millions of years. So prehistoric is the gaze that Puran's neurons, even by extending their countless antennae, cannot make any sense of it...Their ancestor was gazing at them through half-shut eyes and Puran saw that it was shivering lightly. No, not too big. And in those pale eyes, what is it? Is it a query? A plea? Whatever could it be? (67-71; translation mine).

While such incomprehension is symptomatic of the apparently unbridgeable conceptual schism that separates India's subalternised Adivasis from their non-Adivasi countrymen, through Puran, Devi does attempt to signify what that creature, its shadow and its engraved image could mean for the Adivasis themselves: "This is a new myth. The spirits of the long ago dead will return in the form of an unknown, tired bird. This is perhaps not present even in their oral tradition. But in their times of distress they will now wait for that shadow as there is no other human explanation for their deprivation" (140; translation mine). Furthermore, as the testimony of Shankar Nagesia, an educated Adivasi who almost functions as an organic intellectual, attests, this mythical creature will also act as a resource for hope that will ensure greater resilience among the Adivasis to hold on to their lands even in the face of insurmountable adversities caused by administrative and political maladies: "This is our land, no? The Adivasi will not leave. All the places traversed by the ancestral spirit, it informed us, are ours" (141; translation mine).

More than fifty years after the publication of this narrative, another unknown, fantastic winged creature, appears as a resource of hope in the narrative of an Adivasi author in the guise of Jwala Kumar and thus establishes those thematic, formal and modal linkages which connects Devi's text to that of Sekhar. As an Adivasi author who has already established his identity, Sekhar not only testifies to the fact that the subaltern does not always remain silent but his English narratives also assert the fact that despite difficulties it is possible to communicate Adivasi experiences to others which might start to repair the fractures created by thousands of years of exploitation and distrust. Furthermore, such narratives, particularly with their trenchant critiques of dominant discourses, also signal a certain degree of confidence and self-assertion which Devi's representation of Pirtha and its people certainly lacked. Such confidence may either stem from comparative material development among certain groups of Adivasis or it may stem from greater political consciousness leading to various instances of organised resistance. Whatever the reasons may be, it is possibly such confidence that leads to the representation of the Chander family in the text as one which experiences deprivation, but neither discontent nor resignation. Instead, despite their own strained resources, following the same code of hospitality displayed by Bikhiya and Shankar in Devi's narrative, the Chander

family offers refuge to Jwala Kumar despite being uncertain of its identity. Jwala reciprocates their kindness through various acts of benevolent intervention and throughout exudes a sense of joy and vitality that starkly opposes the exhaustion, fragility and eventual extinction associated with the pterodactyl in Devi's narrative. And although Jwala also disappears at the end, the text suggests that it has only rejoined the flock of dragons of which it was originally a part and the option of a return is kept alive by the 'Epilogue' where the Chander siblings together sing "For Jwala Kumar's story will not end/For one day again he will come" (Sekhar 120). If Devi's pterodactyl indeed operates as both myth and message, then Jwala Kumar, as text and creature, acts as a magical reconfiguration of this myth which strives to cleanse both the trauma of victimisation associated with the Adivasis and the obstacles to successful communication between Adivasis and non-Adivasis through the very act of writing itself – an act that Devi herself had also consistently performed through her own writings.

Such magical reconfiguration also paves the way for the dissemination of that anticipatory illumination which Ernst Bloch deems essential for utopian literature and this aligns Sekhar's fantasy with other examples of postcolonial utopianism. As Bill Ashcroft reminds us, "For postcolonial utopianism, as for most contemporary utopian theory, Utopia is no longer a place but the spirit of hope itself, the essence of desire for a better world. The space of utopia has become the space of social dreaming" ("Spaces of Utopia" 2). It is precisely such social dreaming which becomes possible through the fantastic appearance of Jwala Kumar in the impoverished village of Champakbagh where the presence of the dragon brings about a temporary relief from the trauma caused by lack of food, lack of fuel, unavailability of urgent medical care and such other absences. These absences again take us back to that cryptic short sentence from Brecht which Adorno perceived as the key to the utopian impulse: "Something's missing" (Bloch, *Utopian Function* 15). It is the confrontation with various forms of consummate negation, such as what the Chander family and other villagers of Champakbagh have to endure, that generates the need for utopian visions because as Bloch asserts, "...the essential function of utopia is a critique of what is present" (Bloch, *Utopian Function* 12). Sekhar's fantasy produces just such a critique which further extends the problematization of the Indian nation state as a whole which Devi's narratives had been doing for long as well, though in a very different key. Furthermore, such critique is supplemented by what Bloch identified as "anticipatory illumination" (Bloch, *Utopian Function* 41). Jack Zipes explains:

The anticipatory illumination is an image, a constellation, a configuration closely tied to the concrete Utopias that are lit up on the frontal margins of reality and illuminate the possibilities for rearranging social and political relations so that they engender *Heimat*, Bloch's word for the home that we have all sensed but have never experienced or known. (xxxiii)

A world no longer characterized by absence of food, fuel, medical

assistance and such other amenities is that utopia which the Chander family and others like them have never experienced and may strive to actualize. The actions of the dragon, Jwala Kumar, may therefore serve as a symbolic promethean call for such a reordering of social and political relations which might bring about an end to those processes of systemic inequality, discrimination and bureaucratic corruption because of which hundreds of Champakbaghs may continue to languish in darkness. The ‘comprehended hope’ (*docta spes*; Bloch, *Principle of Hope* 7) for such a future is precisely what makes this fantasy an important addition to a growing sphere of postcolonial utopianism. As a text, Sekhar’s Jwala Kumar, thus, challenges the conventional paradigms of Indian children’s literature, critiques western hegemonic discourses and without resorting to a rhetoric of mourning, articulates urgent postcolonial hope. It is these qualities which make it such a stellar work, characterized by that “supervention of novelty” (Eliot 11) which compels us to reorient our own conceptual frameworks.

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# **.Migrations and the struggle with choices in an increasingly unstable world: A reading of Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* and Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island***

**Rimi Nath**

## **Abstract**

Mohsin Hamid and Amitav Ghosh's concern with climate crisis, political instability or migration issue warnings regarding the exercise of choices in an increasingly unstable world. The novels of Hamid and Ghosh posit mass migration as a means of survival. In *Exit West*, Hamid portrays forced migration from an unnamed Islamic Republic, which itself is "swollen with refugees" (1). Hamid's world is the twenty-first century, which sees mass migration from many underdeveloped countries to the West (or any place more stable). In Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*, people migrate from the Sundarbans to Malaysia or Indonesia or other far-off places. Towards the end of the novel, a Blue Boat carrying refugees/ migrants to Italy becomes a focal point of concern. The paper examines the duality and contestation between the claims of the nativists, the migrants and the support groups as the migration scenario makes everyone foreign or that no one is foreign anymore. The paper questions how long can people remain migrants, and attempts to examine the struggle with choices as the characters are pushed to the edge where they are left with no choices or where choices are not always based on individual will. The paper also attempts to show how a constant sense of dislocation suspends identity formation and challenges the notion of 'purity' of race, nation or culture.

**Keywords:** Migration, climate crisis, political instability, identity, South Asia

## **Introduction**

Today climate crisis looms large and overshadows other socio-political concerns. It would be imprudent to deny climate change and the ensuing global crisis (in terms of health, politics etc.) in order to maintain hierarchies of power, wealth or national status-quo. Migration trend from South Asia is predicted to escalate in the years to come. Amitav Ghosh in *The Great Derangement*(2016)

holds that “the lack of a transitive connection between political mobilization, on the one hand, and global warming, on the other, is nowhere more evident than in the countries of South Asia, all of which are extraordinarily vulnerable to climate change” (168). In Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West*(2017) and Amitav Ghosh’s *Gun Island*(2019),mass migration becomes a means of survival amidst the fears of crippling security arrangements and the sanctity of nations which in turn trigger riots, food crisis, vandalism and anti-immigrant policing. Taking into consideration the scenario of mass migration, the paper examines the position of the nativists, the migrants and the support groups. The paper questions the binary between a migrant and a native, in context, and examines the characters’ struggle with choices in an increasingly unstable world. The paper also engages with the question of identity and the notion of ‘purity’ that is attached to a nation, race or culture. The worldwide Coronavirus pandemic also brings in fresh perspectives on these subjects, and the paper attempts to engage with them.

### **Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West*: Doing Away with Choices**

In Hamid’s *Exit West*, the host societies view the Muslim migrants with increasing suspicion because of many factors, one of them being “with the War on Terror and the global migration crisis, Islam has become the recipient of a cruel apocalyptic affiliation in imperialist or post-imperialist countries such as England, France, and the U.S....” (Hurley & Sinykin 462).In her essay “The Migrant as Colonist: Dystopia and Apocalypse in the Literature of Mass Migration”, Nasia Anam notes how the anxiety about the resurgence of Islam goes back to centuries even prior to colonisation (653-677). Anam cites novels from Anglophone literary sphere which deal with the migrant crisis and where mass migration is seen as colonization in reverse. Hamid novel, *Exit West*, in depicting a world belonging to the twenty-first century, on the other hand, refutes this idea.

Told from the perspective of the migrants, *Exit West* chronicles the story of the lovers, Saeed and Nadia, who are escaping a conflict-ridden Muslim nation (an unnamed Islamic nation, which itself is struggling with refugees). Hamid paints a dystopia in his portrayal of an abyss just as Romesh Gunesekera paints a veiled Sri Lankan dystopia in his novel, *Heaven’s Edge*. The militants have increasingly taken to assault, shooting, planting bombs and capturing territories. Curfews are common. Many conspiracy theories are formed as people devise ways and means of moving out of the country. In Hamid’s *Exit West* militants have also formed rules on conduct and appearance and although Saeed exercises the choice of “a studiously maintained stubble” (1), and Nadia chooses a “flowing black robe” (1), their choice no longer remains a choice as they need to dress “in accordance with the rules on dress and he was bearded in accordance with the rules on beards and her hair was hidden in accordance with the rules on hair” (83). The militants also spread hatred and violence in the host countries to provoke reaction against migrants from other parts of the world. The migrants, in a way, are pushed to the edge.

Nasia Anam in her essay imagines the Muslim nation in the novel to be “post-2011 Syria” (672). However, many instances in the novel also echo the images of war-torn Afghanistan as a probable location such as the description of militants arriving “from their bastions in the hills” (Hamid *EW* 48), ban on music echoing the Taliban regime, public/private executions and killing of “people of a particular sect” (79), echoing the persecution of the Hazaras]. It appears that Saeed and Nadia are left with no choices but to leave. Saeed and Nadia are a part of the globalised world. They (before leaving the country), apart from their respective jobs, attend evening classes “on corporate identity and product branding” (1). Social media and phone/ internet connections build another level of dependency in this technology-driven globalised society, where choices (physical/emotional) get curtailed in a nation when the government disrupts mobile signals as a “temporary anti-terrorism” (55) measure. People are left with no choices and they “felt marooned and alone and much more afraid” (55). Saeed and Nadia move from their homeland to Mykonos, to London and then to a new city of Marin. They experience difficulty in locating home away from ‘home’ as they keep moving from one country to another and hence identity formation (relating to nation and belonging) is suspended.

Migration trend from South Asia is predicted to escalate in the years to come owing to the socio-economic and political distress and distress due to climate crises, rapid growth in population (working-age) and remittance driven government policies (Nath 378). *Exit West* showcases the migration of a Tamil family (probably from Sri Lanka) to Dubai. Hamid in *Exit West* also describes most of the refugees as people of “many colours and hues but mostly falling within a band of brown that ranged from dark chocolate to milky tea” (100). The migration scenario makes everyone foreign and the boundary between a native and a migrant gets blurred. The characters in the novel belonging to different nations seek asylum and appear in safer locations through magic portals. As Saeed and Nadia reach a building in London, they are amazed to see people from different parts of the world crowding the building – there are Nigerians, Somalis, people from Guatemala, Indonesia, Thailand, among other places.

That people are “migrants through time” (Hamid *DC* xvii) also gives a broader perspective on race, borders or nations – a perspective that we get from Saeed’s family’s occasional sky-gazing with the telescope, where they “take turns to look up at objects whose light, often, had been emitted before any of these three viewers had been born – light from other centuries, only now reaching Earth. Saeed’s father called this time-travel” (Hamid *EW* 14). Saeed gets gripped by a sense of loss as he prepares to depart. He mourns the scattering of his extended family and his friends which amounts to “the loss of a home, no less, of his home” (90). Nadia, on the other hand, seems ever ready to move (having moved out of her parents’ home long ago), to embark on an adventure, where nothing can tie her down. For Saeed’s father, home remains fixed in the past, in the memories of his dead wife (who has died an accidental death), as he refuses to accompany Saeed and Nadia. Migration “was both like dying and like being born”

(98) and as Hamid puts it “when we migrate, we murder from our lives those we leave behind” (94), so when Saeed and Nadia leave their country, they leave with this sense of loss.

Saeed, in London, considers moving in with the people of his own country, whereas Nadia rejects any such nostalgia and feels comfortable attending the council meetings of the Nigerians in the building where they have put up. Saeed is moved by the words of his fellow countrymen who advocate unity along religious principles in a world where race, language and nation have lost all meanings. Saeed sees that those are not the words of the militants of his homeland and yet the gathering reminds him of the militants and “when he thought this he felt something rancid in himself, like he was rotting from within” (152-53). He constantly feels that he is left with no choice.

The nativist anxiety and backlash as depicted in the novel arise out of fear of colonisation, losing nationalist privileges and depletion of resources; and, thus, the rich countries were “building walls and fences and strengthening their borders, but seemingly to unsatisfactory effect” (71). Nasia Anam analyses, “at a more fundamental level than ideology, economics, or politics, it is the encroachment into European space— the inversion of European imperial expansion – that appears to prompt the violence of an epochal, apocalyptic reaction” (673). *Exit West* also shows how support groups and aid agencies are formed as volunteers come forward to deliver food and medicine. The novel showcases hope as does Amitav Ghosh’s recent novel, *Gun Island*. The world appears to fracture and come together at the same time— “Without borders nations appeared to be becoming somewhat illusory” (Hamid *EW* 155). *Exit West* also poses an important question— how long can a person be a migrant? The distinction between a native and a migrant dissolves and the futility of the nativist backlash also gets highlighted. Although it is not possible for conflicts to dissolve overnight, but people manage to survive; and as for the nativists, they too have considered facing the crisis with a lot of bravery, “for courage is demanded not to attack when afraid” (164).

Hamid notes the effects of climate change in this manner— “All over the world people were slipping away from where they had been, from once fertile plains cracking with dryness, from seaside villages gasping beneath tidal surges, from overcrowded cities and murderous battlefields, and slipping away from other people too, people they had in some cases loved, as Nadia was slipping away from Saeed, and Saeed from Nadia” (Hamid *EW* 211). The characters portrayed in Hamid’s *Exit West* are pushed to the edge where they are left with no choices or will. But as they begin to settle in, they start exercising their choices. Saeed carries the tendency of being increasingly drawn to people belonging to his homeland both in the labour camps and online. The further he moves away from home, the pull of home becomes even stronger for Saeed. He falls in love with the preacher’s daughter (in the city of Marin), whose mother is from Saeed’s country. For Nadia, her homeland is relegated to a dream of the past, “an era that for her was unambiguously gone” (187) and she exercises her

choices in entering into a same sex relationship which is impossible from where she comes from. Through the novel, Hamid shows how human beings are bound by sorrows, by the transient nature of existence, which appeals for an inclusive society.

In Hamid's *Exit West*, the closing and opening of doors can symbolically signify the "shadow lines" where borders are defied as well as enforced. The doors can stand as symbols of escape, of movement from the known to the unknown, a portal of imagination and of mockery that mocks the desires of individuals seeking escape. The scope of speculation and magic in doors is similar to invading the domain of social media. The undefined location in the novel from where Saeed and Nadia escape can also symbolically stand for irrelevance of nations, where the place can be any place. Windows are also symbolic, in the novel, of exposure, of fear, of death— "A window was the border through which death was possibly most likely to come" (68). The migrants jostle with the perception of being colonizers as they struggle to survive in their unstable world. The prolonged state of being a migrant in this scenario of conflict hardly allows them to exercise their choices, which in turn suspends identity formation. The 'natives' too jostle with their sense of identity as the distinction between a native and a migrant gradually diminishes.

### **Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*: Migration in an Unstable World**

Stories have a powerful role in shaping our understanding of the world, as Cinta in *Gun Island* puts it, "...only through stories was it possible to enter the most inward mysteries of our existence where nothing that is really important can be proven to exist – like love, or loyalty, or even the faculty that makes us turn around when we feel the gaze of a stranger or an animal. Only through stories can invisible or inarticulate or silent beings speak to us; it is they who allow the past to reach out to us..." (127). Identities, like stories, are also fictional. Kwame Anthony Appiah, for instance, in *The Lies that Bind: Rethinking Identity* emphasises on the fictional nature of identity. He considers how maps are drawn and redrawn and how nationalist claims that a people are a people because they share a common ancestry is imaginary. He questions, "But so does a family, to take the idea at its narrowest; and the whole species, at its widest, share its ancestry, too. In seeking nations, where should we draw the line?" (73-74). Amitav Ghosh grapples with these questions in *The Shadow Lines* and *Gun Island*. Piya says, "We're in a new world now. No one knows where they belong any more, neither humans nor animals" (97). With irreversible climate change and large-scale international migration, one's world and world view is bound to transform. It also needs to be accepted that migrants change the landscape of a place and the migrants' presence means that "...its people and manners and ways and habits were undergoing considerable change" (Hamid EW 178).

Migrants in Italy, as mentioned in *Gun Island*, are mainly from Middle East, Africa, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (146). Amitav Ghosh in *The Great*

*Derangement* writes:

Can anyone write about Venice any more without mentioning the *aqua alta*, when the waters of the lagoon swamp the city's streets and courtyards? Nor can they ignore the relationship that this has with the fact that one of the languages most frequently heard in Venice is Bengali: the men who run the quaint little vegetable stalls and bake the pizzas and even play the accordion are largely Bangladeshi, many of them displaced by the same phenomenon that now threatens their adopted city— sea-level rise. (84)

Human history has been a history of migration both in time and in space. The Bhola Cyclone (Nov 12, 1970) and the creation of Bangladesh (in 1971) have resulted in a steady stream of refugees from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) to India. In *Gun Island*, Ghosh writes, “for several months people had been coming across the border, into India, in order to escape the political turmoil on the other side; now the flow turned into flood, bringing many more hungry mouths into a region that was already desperately short of food” (14). A book review on *Gun Island* states:

Amitav Ghosh in the novel depicts how the hardships of living in the Sundarbans (lack of means of sustenance, natural disasters, impacts of climate change, etc.) are so grave that people pay traffickers to smuggle them to Malaysia or Indonesia or to far-off places. The people from these places are left with no choices. Even the animals are moving, as the marine biologist, Piya’s research shows. Her research involves tracking river dolphins that are facing strange fate and are fleeing the waters of Sundarbans. (Nath, 141)

Deen, the protagonist of the novel, who is from Kolkata, settles in Brooklyn because of a personal tragedy (the death of the woman he has been in love with). His origin lies in Bangladesh as his parents and grandparents have moved to India in 1947. As Deen visits Kolkata one winter his life gets linked to the legend of the Gun Merchant and the goddess of snakes, Manasa Devi. The Gun Merchant, the protagonist of a folk legend, struggles with choices. He is pursued by the goddess as he has refused to become her devotee. “Plagued by snakes and pursued by droughts, famines, storms, and other calamities, he had fled overseas to escape the goddess’s wrath, finally taking refuge in a land where there were no serpents, a place called ‘Gun Island’ – Bonduk dwip” (Ghosh GI 16), but he has not been able to hide. He finally becomes a devotee and constructs a shrine for the goddess. Deen realises that the Gun Merchant’s misfortunes “were due to his own arrogance, and his conviction that he was rich enough and clever enough, to avoid paying deference to the forces represented by the goddess of snakes” (55-56). The natural world is being depleted because of man’s greed. The animal world too is left with no choice and is increasingly facing displacement.

In *Gun Island*, as Tipu (whom Deen meets in the Sundarbans, who gets bitten by a cobra and who is visited by unsettling premonitions) and Deen talk online, they converse about the notion of greed and the apocalypse. Tipu says, “...it’s not parasites we got inside of us, it’s greed! If that’s what a demon is,

there's no way it's imaginary. Shit no! We're all demons" (111). Deen responds, "You may be right, Tipu, but you know what? That's really bad news, because according to Hindu mythology, when demons take over is when the world ends. There's something called *pralaya* that happens – everything dissolves, even time. But it could happen in other ways too. The Zoroastrians say rivers of molten metal will flow over the earth. The Christians say death, disease, famine and war will bring the Apocalypse. The Incas thought it would start with earthquakes; Muslims say the oceans will burst forth and the dead will turn in their graves..." (111). Deen, Tipu, Piya, Cinta and everyone else in the novel have witnessed this unfolding of the catastrophic processes.

Deen finds out that the shrine of the goddess has been built around 1605 to 1690 (22) and with the help of Cinta he links the story of the Gun Merchant to the climate calamity of the seventeenth century (the Little Ice Age). The Gun Merchant has also been to Venice, fleeing the wrath of the Goddess. Cinta highlights that Venice "...was then the most cosmopolitan place in the world" (142). She insists that Deen must visit the *getto* of Venice – "Well, then you must come back to Venice – to Banadiq" (143). Cinta suspects that Bonduki Sadagar (Gun Merchant) is called Bonduki because of that; he must have stayed in the *getto* of Venice. Venice also happens to be the place where Deen encounters new possibilities. A refugee boat is finally rescued in Italy amidst the hostile response of the natives. Deen also finds a companion for himself, in Piya. Tipu's reunion with Rafi is also a remarkable tale of bonding and the inexplicable forces of nature.

In *Gun Island*, a Blue Boat carrying refugees/ migrants becomes the core of media attention and the Blue Boat becomes symbolic of "everything that's going wrong with the world – inequality, climate change, capitalism, corruption, the arms trade, the oil industry..." (199). It is remarkable that this group of migrants finds protection and support amidst increasing nativist backlash.

## Conclusion

Pluralism seems fragile, as "a spumy wave of right-wing nationalism surges across Europe once more" (Appiah 104). Minority nationalism too shows no sign of losing steam. Will Kymlicka in *Politics in the Vernacular* analyses minority nationalisms and shows how it is not always illiberal, pre-modern or xenophobic (277). The question of a migrant has and will always remain in contestation with such nationalisms (both right wing nationalism and minority nationalism). On the other hand, culture cannot be conceived as a whole. It is hard to find a monolingual or mono-religious nation-state as all cultural practices are mobile. Amitav Ghosh in *The Great Derangement* puts it, "Where it concerns human beings, it is almost always true that the more anxiously we look for purity the more likely we are to come upon admixture and interbreeding" (145).

Freedom of choice is questioned in times of crisis and the Coronavirus

pandemic that has spread across the globe by the beginning of 2020 gives a new perspective on these ideas. The limitlessness of choices is put into doubt and is resisted. Climate change also resists such notions of choices or freedom. In the world stage, it asks if it is possible to hold on to nativism and isolationism. The crisis, here, is also the crisis of possibilities and imagination. However, the world has also come together in this as Ghosh in *The Great Derangement* puts it: "The trouble, however, is that the contagion has already occurred, everywhere: the ongoing changes in the climate, and the perturbations that they will cause *within* nations, cannot be held at bay by reinforcing man-made boundaries. We are in an era when the body of the nation can no longer be conceived of as consisting only of a territorialized human population : its very sinews are now revealed to be intertwined with forces that cannot be confined by boundaries" (193). Yuval Noah Harari, in his article, "The World after Coronavirus" writes, "We can hope that the current epidemic will help humankind realise the acute danger posed by global disunity" (Harari). Judith Butler in the article "Capitalism Has its Limits" discusses how Covid-19 pandemic isolates as well as calls for interdependence. The virus is not aware of boundaries or territories as national policies are. Butler discusses the myriad forms of inequality, capitalist exploitation, etc and writes – "The virus alone does not discriminate, but we humans surely do, formed and animated as we are by the interlocking powers of nationalism, racism, xenophobia and capitalism" (Butler).

Mohsin Hamid and Amitav Ghosh portray migration as a means of survival, where the migrants are left with no choice. The pandemic too has left migrants with no choice, be it labour migrants or jobless migrants from overseas. Such dislocation suspends identity formation in terms of one's sense of belongingness; and the distinctions between a native and migrant, national and global considerations stand contested.

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# WRITING KASHMIR, WRITING THE END OF EMPIRE: A STUDY OF TWO POST-WAR BRITISH NOVELS

**Somjyoti Mridha**

## Abstract

The paper proposes to engage with two post-war British novels *Kingfishers Catch Fire* (1953) by Rumer Godden and *The Kashmir Shawl* (2011) by Rosie Thomas and explore the politics of representing colonialism and its demise in the context of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. Though Kashmir wasn't a part of the British territories in India, it came within the ambit of British hegemony under the Dogra regime and its representation is marked by typical colonial mindset since the mid-nineteenth century. The primary objective of the paper is to provide a postcolonial reading of these two novels in order to deconstruct their inherent colonial bias and decode the cultural politics of the 'persistence of Empire' in post-war British literature. The paper will focus on the cultural politics of representing Kashmir and its people within the larger narrative of Empire and its imminent dissolution. It is evident from these narratives that in spite of their 'good intentions', all the British characters expose their sense of superiority and social one-upmanship in their interaction with Kashmiris. These narratives written in the aftermath of the Second World War and the dismemberment of the British Empire in South Asia play a crucial role by evoking nostalgia for the Raj during a period when British influence in the international arena was on the wane. This paper will also explore the cultural politics of nostalgia for the Raj in the context of these two novels.

**Keywords:** Kashmir, End of Empire, Decolonization, Nostalgia, Cultural Politics

Colonialism has been one of the major influences in the political and cultural life of not only the colonies but also Great Britain since the nineteenth century. There has been a steady production of fictional narratives about the colonies creating an ideological consensus for British presence in the colonies since the onset of colonialism. Writers like Rudyard Kipling and E.M. Forster wrote masterpieces like *Kim* and *A Passage to India* respectively, which were immensely popular in Britain as well as the colonies. Narrativizing colonialism was a fairly popular theme for British writers since the mid-nineteenth century. It continued even after the political system of colonization was dismantled and

erstwhile colonies gained political independence. The memory of the British raj was glorified in the cultural life of Britain and assumed centre stage through literary and cinematic productions that narrativised the Raj long after the major colonies got political independence. Some of these literary and cultural productions remain the mainstay of post-colonial British culture. Since the political dominance of Great Britain waned during the Cold War era, Britain strived for political validation by culturally producing nostalgia for the Raj. These cultural productions were curiously much relished by the literati and the glitterati of the erstwhile colonies as well. Novels such as *The Jewel in the Crown* (1966) by Paul Scott, *The Far Pavilions* (1978) by M. M. Kaye, *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973) by J.G. Farrell created a sense of nostalgia for the Raj and were immensely popular in Britain. TV series was made on *The Jewel in the Crown* and *The Far Pavilions*, while *The Siege of Krishnapur* went on to win the Booker prize in 1973.

The phrase ‘end of the empire’ generally refers to the moment of decolonization for most countries of Asia, Africa and South America after centuries of colonial yoke. Even in academic discourse “end of the empire” is primarily considered from the perspective of the colonized because of the popularity of Postcolonial studies since the 1990s. During the colonial period and thereafter, it was commonly understood that colonizing European nations influenced the colonies in myriad ways while the influence of the colonies was negated in the metro pole. Recently, the academic gaze has turned towards Europe which was grappling with the loss of colonies in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. The socio-political and cultural ramifications were widespread though ignored until recently. According to Berny Sebe and Matthew G. Standard,

...decolonization was a fundamentally fluid process of fluxes and refluxes involving not only transfers of populations, ideas and sociocultural practices across continents but also complex intra-European dynamics at a time of convergence following the Treaty of Rome. Decolonization was neither a process of sudden, rapid changes to European cultures nor one of cultural inertia, but a development marked by fluidity, movement and dynamism (Sebe and Standard 2).

This paper deals with two post-war British novels writing about Kashmir and the empire in its death throes.

This paper will focus on two novels, *Kingfishers Catch Fire* (1953) by Rumer Godden and *The Kashmir Shawl* (2011) by Rosie Thomas which re-created nostalgia for the Raj in the context of Kashmir. Godden’s *Kingfishers Catch Fire* is a bildungsroman of the character named Sophie and *The Kashmir Shawl* is a novel about love, longing and self-attainment of itinerant female characters separated by generations with the Raj as the political context. These novels are diverse in their motifs, linguistic manoeuvres, themes and are published over a gap of half a century. The common thread that binds them is the colonial fascination for Kashmir as well as their effort at narrativizing the end of

British rule in the Indian subcontinent. Deriving from Frederic Jameson's theorization of third world texts, especially novels as "national allegories" in "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism"<sup>1</sup>, this paper argues that all novels of colonial encounters are allegories of empire narrativizing structures of colonial exploitation and domination in order to bolster the claims of colonial hegemony. This paper intends to provide a postcolonial reading of these novels with a singular focus on their representation of Kashmir and its populace.

Kashmir has generated a lot of academic interest in recent times primarily because of armed resistance against the Indian state since the 1990s. It has remained a perpetual topic of national importance since its inclusion in the Union of India because of various reasons. The most recent political development, that is, the abrogation of Article 370 and Article 35A and the subsequent internet shut down has generated renewed controversy surrounding the Kashmir issue. Kashmir remained crucial to the Indian nation state and ideas of Indianness since its inception in 1947. It also had seminal political presence in the imaginary of the British Raj. Primarily owing to the fact, that the state of Jammu and Kashmir was the largest princely state in terms of territory within British Indian Empire whose relationship with the colonial state was guided by the treaty of Subsidiary alliance. Outside the direct control of the colonial state, the Kashmir valley experienced something like secondary colonialism for lack of a better term. It generated a lot of interest among the Britishers residing in India. Numerous literary narrative and travelogues testify to the fact. The novels dealt with in this paper refer to itinerant Britishers travelling to Kashmir in order to explore the pleasure potential inherent in the beautiful valley and the city of Srinagar.

The state of Jammu and Kashmir in general and the Kashmir valley in particular, though not central to the colonial project in India remained a cherished location to retreat from the murky business of Empire and a travel hotspot since the mid-nineteenth century. The high demand for Kashmiri property among British colonials forced the Dogra monarch to promulgate the State Subject Act in 1927<sup>2</sup> which restricted property ownership for anyone who is not a state subject. It was primarily promulgated in order to thwart settler colonial aspirations of the colonial British citizens. The State Subject Act of 1927 is the precursor of Article 35A of the Indian constitution which empowers the Jammu and Kashmir Legislative Assembly to determine permanent residents of the state of Jammu and Kashmir and was abrogated along with Article 370. In both the novels the narratives revolve around British presence in Kashmir, their desire for property ownership and their rented property. Both Sophie in *Kingfishers Catch Fire* and Myrtle in *The Kashmir Shawl* express their desires to own property but are thwarted by restrictions and hence resort to renting property in Kashmir valley. Within discourses of desire generated by colonialism, a system that institutionalized hierarchical relationships between the colonizer and the colonized, this desire for a home in Kashmir among British colonials

becomes a metonymic representation of the colonial states' expansionist political ambitions. Thus, when Sophie exclaims that, "I am ... homesick for them ... Homesick!" for the valley of Kashmir, it is more political than personal nostalgia about her experiences in Dilkhusha (Godden 2). In pure simple terms, it is an expression of collective British nostalgia for the empire once it was lost. It is crucial to note that *Kingfishers Catch Fire* was published after the British Indian empire achieved political independence with the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir as a constituent part in 1947.

In curious ways, the supremacy of the colonizer in all spheres of social and political life stands reversed, though in a much mitigated manner, in the context of Kashmir since the Maharaja is at the helm of affairs. Sophie's nostalgia for Kashmir and the wistful language employed to describe Kashmir in the prologue of *Kingfishers Catch Fire* may be politically read as the desire of the settler colonial for a territory/space lost. The recollection of good memories from Kashmir also has her innate desire to control the narrative about the bad turn of events in Kashmir. The narrative of *Kingfishers Catch Fire* and that of its protagonist Sophie is loosely based on Godden's personal experiences in Kashmir, including the disturbing one where her cook tried to poison her with glass particles mixed with her food. *Kingfishers Catch Fire* does not devolve into a murder mystery or a colonial gothic like M.M. Kaye's *Death in Kashmir*. In the context of British fictional treatment of colonial spaces so succinctly theorized by Alan Sinfield, Godden resorts to "enthusiastic myth-making that is the obverse of hostile stereotyping" (Sinfield 127). Though Kashmir was practically sold to the Dogra chieftain Gulab Singh for 7.5 lakhs both as a reward for his loyalty to the British during the Anglo-Sikh wars and the British reluctance to engage with the ever expanding Russian empire, in the heyday of British colonial presence Kashmir signified lost possibility for the British colonials. In these narratives, written after the British Raj was dismantled from the Indian subcontinent, a characteristic nostalgia is generated about the Raj. In both the novels, the Raj has been imagined as a perfect political arrangement vis-à-vis the impoverished, ill-managed and pre-modern Dogra state. There are repeated references to ethnic and communal disturbances in these novels. The primary political motive is to showcase the inefficiency of the Dogra state in maintaining law and order and present it as a contrast to the orderly British territories in India. Poverty and communal tension were highlighted in order to create a discourse in defense of British colonial presence in other parts of the Indian sub-continent. This is not to say that communal disturbances were not happening. Since 1931, militant anti-Dogra state agitations by Sheikh Abdullah's Muslim Conference which was later on named as National Conference, took the form of violent attack against members of the Kashmiri Pandit community.

Kashmir was constructed as the delectable spot created for the pleasure seeking British colonials within European exclusive clubs outside the hubbub of the city of Srinagar. This conceptualization of Kashmir as the pleasure ground of British colonizers enjoying their vacation found continuity in the post-

Independence imaginary which reduces the valley as a space devoid of human habitation and aspirations of its own. Repeated references to the beauty of the landscape and the poetry of existence in Kashmir coupled with vivid description of poverty create a fertile ground for colonial intervention yet the authors are painfully aware of the imminent departure of the British from the sub-continent. Kashmir is conceptualized as both pre-modern and delectable. Occasionally, it is delectable because it is pre-modern which concomitantly produces the desire to bring in the signposts of modernity. These contradictory impulses generated by colonialism which on the one hand promises the fruits of colonial modernity yet deprives the colonized equivalence on grounds of race and class because it is only in the deference that power may be realized, herein lay the continuation of colonization. In the context of Kashmir, discourses generated by colonization, including the novels dealt here tend to put the onus of delayed modernity on the Dogra princely state. For instance, Godden's chief protagonist, Sophie imagines Kashmir as "Russia in the Eastern sense, like its old name Scythia; the sweet green tea they drink here is made in a samowar which is much the same as a samovar. Russia of the old days" (Godden 13). The description of Kashmir in these novels is characterized with contradictions. Poverty and underdevelopment are vividly described along with a characteristic desire to possess and settle in this land of unparalleled beauty. A curious sense of nostalgia is also generated through the language of desire in both Godden and Thomas. Rumer Godden begins her novel with a visual description of Kashmir equating the territory with its natural beauty and artisanal treasures. In the prologue, Godden writes, "...her eyes were tender as her fingers traced the bright birds on the lamp; Kingfishers always made her think of Kashmir; with the bulbul, the lotus, the iris, vine and chenar leaf, they are the symbols of the country; over and over again they appear in carvings and embroideries and are woven in Kashmiri silk and carpets (Godden 2). Thomas' approach is more direct and describes the valley of Kashmir as "the most beautiful place Nerys had ever seen" (89). The iterative reference to delectable scenic beauty of Kashmir not only represents colonial desire for territory but also projects Kashmir, to be a land untouched by industrial modernity.

Nerys and Sophie, both belonging to rural England, consider Kashmir as a replica of their native place complicating the discourse of desire, power and nostalgia generated in the novels. For British imperialists, a Kashmiri Village is the locus of unchangeability since "nothing much had changed here in centuries" (Thomas 209). Orientalist imperial gaze became the dominant mode of representing Kashmir since the early period of colonialism in India which in a way paved the way for entrenched British control over the largest princely state in the Indian sub-continent. As Vanessa Chishti writes, "The colonial engagement with Kashmir was marked by contradictory impulses: the desire to preserve Kashmir as an untainted paradise on the one hand and the desire to bring colonial 'order' to it on the other. While the former impulse dominated early accounts, the latter was not entirely absent. A British influence over the valley became more direct in the last quarter of the nineteenth century; the colonial

desire to transform Kashmir became more pronounced" (Chishti 276). In fact, the novels portray colonial intervention in a direct fashion. British characters portrayed in these novels are mostly missionaries, soldiers, colonial government servants and their spouses. The very reason for their existence in Kashmir is primarily to safeguard British interests in the Indian sub-continent. The omnipresence of soldiers signify war time society in far flung areas of the British empire as well as imminent social unrest due to the impending transfer of political power in India which subsequently brought about the violent episode of partition of the Indian sub-continent. Yet, their omnipresence clearly exposes the violent nature of colonial occupation belying the rhetorical significance accorded to civilizing mission undertaken by the empire. In fact, the civilizing mission is purely interventionist and primarily undertaken in order to protect and perpetuate the interest of the colonizers at the expense of the colonized.

The furtive and futile presence of the Mission in *Kingfishers Catch Fire* and Evans' personal zeal for proselytization is politically significant. There is a characteristic ironical treatment of Christian missionary zeal in both the novels. Both Nerys in *The Kashmir Shawl* and Sophie in *Kingfishers Catch Fire* are aware of the futile intervention of the missionaries in religious landscape of Kashmir. Yet both these characters intervene in the life of local Kashmiris without any hesitation. Nerys' intervention in the life of a female Kashmiri shawl weaver and her children brings about positive changes in their life. She also strives to teach English language, another colonial pedagogical intervention in the sub-continent, to hapless Kashmiri and Ladakhi children without any avenues for improving their lot. Sophie's intervention in the Dar versus Sheikh conflict in the village destroys social harmony. While Sophie conveniently leaves the scene as she returns to Toby and England, the villagers are left to live with the consequences of disturbed peace much like the fractured sub-continent bequeathed by the British once the empire was dismantled.

Colonization is a system maintained by both military and structural violence. It creates an artificial hierarchy in the colonized territories where the colonizer is accorded a certain degree of primacy denied to the colonized in their native land. In the words of Fanon,

A world compartmentalized, Manichaean and petrified, a world of statues: the statue of the general who led the conquest, the statue of the engineer who built the bridge. A world cocksure of itself, crushing with its stoniness the backbones of those scarred by the whip. That is the colonial world...The first thing the colonial subject learns is to remain in his place and not overstep its limits (Fanon 15).

Racial and social superiority claimed by the colonizer cuts across class boundaries and is supported by racist discourses which gained the status of popular science in Britain since the nineteenth century. The claims of racial and social superiority by the colonizer were assisted by the subterranean threat of violence bolstered by the military might of the empire. These racial supremacist discourses have currency even after political decolonization of the erstwhile

colonies with the elite subscribing to such views in a more or less uncritical fashion. Rosie Thomas writing after half a century of decolonization tends to uncritically narrate instances of superior claims of the British without so much as a critical remark. As narrators of the Raj, both Godden and Thomas subscribes to discourses of racial superiority of the British bolstering the legacy of writers of the Raj like Rudyard Kipling. As Alan Sinfield has rightly pointed out,

Societies have to reproduce themselves culturally as well as materially, and this is done in great part by putting into circulation stories of how the world goes. Diverse institutions are involved in this (the media, religions, political parties, education), and the texts designated literary, and the processes of that designation, contribute. They present the attempt of literary intellectuals, in the changing conditions of their medium and society generally, to make persuasive sense of the world (Sinfield 2).

Colonial domination over vast swathes of the empire was primarily possible through discourses of racial and cultural superiority. These discourses helped camouflage the real purpose of colonial domination, that is, political subjugation and exploitation of resources in the colony. The exceptional deference and courtesy meted out to the not so privileged Britishers like Nerys, Caroline, Evan in *The Kashmir Shawl* and Sophie and her children in *Kingfishers Catch Fire* is a testament to the social one-upmanship accorded to the colonizers within a colonial space. In fact, most of the British characters depicted in both the novels belong to the middle class and some like Sophie is practically a destitute widow. In spite of all her problems, Sophie constantly enjoys a feeling of one-upmanship due to the stark poverty of the villagers. While she says, “We shall be poor like the Kashmiris ... we shall be poor and frugal. We shall toil” (Godden 35), she is also constantly reminded that she is not a Kashmiri but a British woman residing in the British dominated Indian subcontinent. In spite of her poverty, her exceptional importance is brought home through words of caution uttered by well-wishers like Sister Locke, who reminds her, “You should be what you are—British” (56).

The narration in both the novels is permeated through a female imperialist gaze comfortably aware of their superior racial and social position vis a vis their Kashmiri counterparts. While analyzing racism in *Literature, Culture and Politics in Post War Britain*, Alan Sinfield distinguishes between two different kinds of racism in the novels representing colonialism. They are structural racism and phobic racism. He writes,

Structural racism helps to legitimate the social order, but it may be relatively unimportant to the individuals who manifest it. Phobic racism, on the other hand, seeks to secure not just the economic, political and general psychic well-being of the European; the racial other is invoked, also, as a way of handling profound personal inadequacy (Sinfield 121).

While none of the fictional characters in these two novels suffer from what Alan Sinfield terms as “phobic racist” both these narratives expose structural racism of the colonial world. Fictional characters in both the novels are aware of

their superior racial/social position vis-a-vis any Indians in their vicinity. Archie McMinn depicted as a devoted husband and perfect gentleman throughout *The Kashmir Shawl* have no compunctions about “commandeering the places regardless of who might have arrived ahead of them. As a British sahib and a proper daughter of the Raj, Archie and Myrtle automatically took the precedence they saw their due. They felt no compunctions in ousting Ladakhi or Kashmiri travelers from the shelters...”(Thomas 82). The obsequious behavior of elderly Kashmiri men towards these middle class British women characters are depicted in order to drive home the exceptional importance of being British in colonial India.

In fact, *Kingfishers Catch Fire* and the colonial episode of *The Kashmir Shawl* reduce Kashmiris as little more than caricatures, nuisance makers, servants and ill-mannered beggars. The servants in these two novels have a muted presence apart from Nabir Dar while none apart from Sultan exercises any agency in their actions. These novels abound in racial stereo-typing, ideologically concomitant with colonization. The stereotypes employed are Janus-faced, simultaneously orientalizing Kashmir and Kashmiris in order to invoke desire and nostalgia as well as elicit horror and pity. Sophie’s insistence on Sultan’s infantilization and exoneration in spite of definite criminal intent is characteristic of colonial attitude towards colonized native where they are subjected to varied stereotypes, occasionally contradictory ones but never considered fellow humans on an equal footing. The only exception in the representation of Kashmiri characters is in the references to the Maharaja and his charming but sexually dissipated cousin, Ravi Singh. This is primarily because of their status as royalty. They are spared the imperialist female gaze through which everything Indian is presented in both the novels. These novels (though published much later) guided by the social mores of Victorian and Edwardian England tend to be more generous towards the aristocracy. Ravi Singh, though portrayed in a seamier light, is not projected as an outright villain in spite of his sexual dalliance and transgressing the sexual boundaries made sacrosanct by the Raj in order to maintain racial and social hierarchy in colonial India.

Both the novels intermittently refer to the imminent end of the empire. Sophie’s final departure from Dilkusha, as a consequence of her thwarted attempts at “civilizing” the Kashmiri villagers anticipates the departure of the British from the sub-continent. Myrtle in *The Kashmir Shawl* described as the offspring of the Raj is at a loss to understand the incipient nationalist fervor across the length and breadth of the British Indian Empire. She anticipates the departure of the British from the Indian sub-continent in no uncertain terms as she voices her anxiety, “I don’t understand India any more. It’s all I know, but I can hardly recognize the country I grew up, or understand what’s happening to beautiful Kashmir. They want us to leave, and we will do, but what will happen after that? There’ll be nothing left, nothing but blood and destruction” (Thomas 307). Her concern is as much for Kashmir as for her irrelevance in the land of her birth. As a member of the colonizing race and accustomed to commanding in all

spheres of life, the British community in India were at a loss to understand the new reality of not legitimately belonging to the Indian sub-continent for political reasons. With the dismantling of the British Empire and loss of Britain's preeminence in the international arena, the colonial elite found themselves disenfranchised and rootless, returning back to the so called mother country where they had tenuous ties. Myrtle and Archie McMinn represents that cross section of the colonial elite who experienced political and social upheavals with the end of the empire. The prospect of repatriation looms large in their minds. The most poignant moment about the end of the Empire in *The Kashmir Shawl* is when Archie McMinn refers to the prospect of winning the war. For the war battered McMinn, the end of the war brings forth possibility of renewed life and he states, "... then there will be a life again. A New world" (Thomas 342). Yet, he ignores the possibility of the loss of Empire in the aftermath of the war and the ensuing changes bound to unfold due to political exigencies. The ever perceptive Nerys "marveled at Archie's spirit in genuinely counting himself as fortunate, and in looking forward to a new world in which the British India the McMinns had known all their lives would almost certainly no longer exist" (342). The new world envisioned by McMinn and Nerys is that of decolonization and the loss of exclusive privileges of the British in a newly independent India and their subsequent departure to Britain. It is a moment of supreme irony when colonial officials envision the incumbent new world order without British hegemony as something to look forward to. For the *The Kashmir Shawl* published as recent as 2012, it would have been grossly politically incorrect to refer to decolonization as anything other than a novel way of life full of possibilities for the greater good. That the primacy of the British is a thing of the past in the Indian sub-continent is evident from the treatment meted out to Mair, Nerys' granddaughter, during her travels in post-colonial era Leh and Kashmir valley.

For the McMinn family depicted in *The Kashmir Shawl*, the end of the empire signifies the end of privileges and home while Sophie's tribulations in *Kingfishers Catch Fire* are far easier since she is well ensconced within English polite society and was linked with the empire only through her marriage with Denzil. She manages to escape Kashmir before the political upheavals began. Of course, her departure signifies the imminent departure of the British from the Indian sub-continent in the aftermath of the Second World War. These two novels represent different cross section of the colonial elite including Indian aristocracy created by the Raj and their predicament with the end of colonial era. Indian Nationalist agitations and the anti-Dogra Monarchy agitations in Kashmir led to the dismantling of the empire and its political structures which in turn led to the downfall of the Dogra monarchy. So in some ways, the end of the British Empire in the Indian sub-continent is also the end of the old feudal Kashmir under Dogra dominance. Both these novels tend not only to aestheticize the Raj but also unwittingly narrativize its downfall along with all the allied political structures that it propped. The immediate victims of dismantling of the Empire were the colonial elite situated in India ensconced as they were in the privileges that came from belonging to the ruling class and race.

## Notes :

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- <sup>1</sup> This is a reference to Frederic Jameson's controversial assertion that, "All third-world texts are necessarily, I want to argue, allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call national allegories, even when, or perhaps I should say, particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel." This assertion led to a controversy and in response eminent South Asian scholar, Aijaz Ahmad wrote the essay, "Jameson's rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory'" anthologized in his book, *In Theory: Classes, Nations Literatures*. Though the paper derives its premise from Jameson's assertion in order to subvert its logic, it is not uncritical about the remark.
- <sup>2</sup> There are frequent references to the history of Kashmir in the paper, especially of the nineteenth century. The books consulted are Mridu Rai's *Hindu Rulers, Muslim Subjects: Islam, Rights and the History of Kashmir*, Chitralekha Zutshi's *Languages of Belonging: Islam, Regional identity and the Making of Kashmir*. These books have not been included in the list of works cited since the paper does not cite from these books but they were crucial for understanding of Kashmiri history.

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# THE DEPICTION OF DALIT WOMEN IN INDIAN WOMEN'S POETRY IN ENGLISH

**Shruti Sareen**

## Abstract

The paper views the Dalit woman as represented in selected poetry by Meena Kandasamy, Aruna Gogulamanda, Nitoo Das, Sampurna Chattarji, Nandini Dhar and Anindita Sengupta through an intersectional approach. The Dalit woman is exploited in a way which is neither experienced by Dalit men nor by upper caste women. According to Uma Chakravarti, the four main facets in which a Dalit woman is exploited are with respect to water, education, sexuality, and the idea of untouchability and pollution. All these four facets are also brought out by the body of poetry examined here. Dalit women are not allowed access to water resources. They are systematically denied education or else ill-treated in institutions. Upper caste men use Dalit women as devdasis, or as loose women which they have free access to at any time. Ideas of purity and pollution force them into traditionally ‘dirty’ occupations such as fishing, manual scavenging, devdasi and so on. Finally the paper also attempts to see Dalit women through Mary Douglas’s and Julia Kristeva’s formulation of the “abject”—that part of the self which has been disowned and repudiated.

**Keywords :** Dalit women, discrimination, Indian women's poetry, pollution, untouchability, education.

Dalit women's poetry has emerged only in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Before the year-2000, there were no Dalit women poets writing in English, though indeed there were many writings in other Indian languages. The other women poets, who did write in English in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, also seemed to be more concerned in documenting their own experiences, than that of others. However, this has changed with the new century, and a few poets do depict Dalit women in their poems, though their tribe needs to increase. Radha Kumar writes that the Indian feminist movement throughout the late 60s, and the 70s and 80s was not able to bring Dalit women into its fold. Dalit women's conferences and so on started happening only as late as 1995, such as Samvadini- Dalit Stree Sahitya Manch, National Federation of Dalit Women, All India Dalit Women's Forum, Dalit Mahila Sangathan, and so on. The high point came in 2001 with the international conference on race in Durban, South Africa. Thus, after this point, caste-consciousness began to increase and we see the rise of Dalit women's poetry in English. This paper examines poetry depicting Dalit women, written by Meena Kandasamy, Aruna Gogulamanda, Nitoo Das, Anindita Sengupta, Sampurna

Chattarji and Nandini Dhar. The latter three do not self-identify as Dalit women, although they do depict them in a few poems.

Intersectional theorists such as Kimberle Crenshaw, Deborah King and Ange-Marie Hancock inform that the impact of intersectionality is multiplicative, not additive. Dalit women are at the crossroads of being Dalit and women, if one goes back to Kimberle Crenshaw's old metaphor of intersectionality as a crossroad. Thus, one cannot grasp the experience of Dalit women simply by adding up the experiences of Dalits and the experiences of women. The experiences of Dalit women are totally different because, on the one hand, they have always been sidelined within the mainstream women's movement. On the other hand, they have been marginalised within the Dalit movement as well where the men have taken centre stage.

Rajni Tilak who founded CADAM (Centre for Alternative Dalit Media) in 1995, states that the mainstream feminist movement often misconstrues Dalit women's issues. The feminist movement was in favour of autonomy for bar dancing girls in Mumbai, but did not realise that most of these Dalit girls had no alternative. Uma Chakravarti in 'In Her Own Write: Writing From a Dalit Feminist Standpoint' traces Dalit women's writing in various Indian languages and sees a few thrust areas or points of focus, namely, the sexual availability of Dalit women to upper caste men, lack of access to education, lack of access to water, and the "untouchability" and associations with pollution which forced them into traditionally dirty occupations (Chakravarti 134-145). These are the few chief areas which also emerge from the poetry discussed below. After a brief discussion of these four issues, the paper focuses upon Dalit women's poetry in English and shows the same four features operating therein.

Uma Chakravarti analyses how the caste system stringently controls female sexuality, or has even perhaps been created precisely in order to control land ownership and women's sexuality, as Ambedkar argued. Endogamous marriages have been the primary means through which separate, enclosed castes have become possible. Upper caste women are regarded as the gateway or as the entry points into the caste system. Mixed caste marriages would pollute the purity of the caste. The most polluting castes are those that are the unions of a woman of a higher caste and a man from a lower caste. Thus, there was a need to stringently control the upper caste woman's sexuality which leads to their seclusion. While the woman's sexuality is strictly monitored, the sexuality of the upper caste man is given a free rein. Many castes practise hypergamy where a lower caste woman married a higher caste man, enabling the woman's caste to gradually rise up in the hierarchy. Such couples may have to elope or may be brutally killed. Thus, there is a close connection between class, caste and gender and the present time has been called *Kaliyuga*, because it is a time when normative structures are overturned, there is mixing of castes and women and lower castes do not perform their duties.

Apart from such marriages, upper caste men have always had sexual access

to lower caste women through material power. The lower caste woman is regarded as a natural aspect of desire and pleasure. Women of the lower castes, unlike upper caste women, were not considered to be *grihinis* or family women, and could even be denied their own children. There is no option for the lower caste woman but to abort the child of the upper caste man. It is only with class mobilisation in recent years that the rape and sexual abuse of lower caste women is being resisted by the Dalits. This leads to exploitation of landless labourers who are the Dalit poor by the upper castes. Even though the Constitution formally ended caste based discrimination in public spaces, it has not broken the hold of the upper castes over material resources or state machinery. While they can take a woman from the lower castes they cannot give a woman to the lower castes. The lower caste woman realises that it is not egalitarianism that makes an upper caste man willing to marry her, but is in fact a demonstration of his power over the low caste woman. (Chakravarti 134-145)

Anagha Tambe in 'Reading Devadasi Practice Through Popular Marathi Literature' states that Devdasis are Dalit women who, on attaining a certain age, are married off to the gods. Once the woman is married to the god and becomes a devdasi, she becomes the wife of the whole village and is exploited by upper caste men for their sexual needs. Unlike other devdasis who are considered temple women, the lower caste jogtin or devdasi is given no space or rights in the temple and is cast on the periphery, left to seek her subsistence in the village. The devdasi is not permitted to get married. If her parents try to save her from the jogtin life, the entire family is beaten with sticks and is driven out of the village. Similarly, a jogta is a man who is supposed to cross dress and act as a devdasi.

A jogtin cannot complain of sexual harassment, unlike a married woman. A jogtin is freely available to all men of the village. The jogtin may have a relationship with an upper caste man and become a zulwa or mistress, but never a wife. In a zulwa relation, the man would accept the paternity of the child. The woman is dishonoured if she gets pregnant outside a zulwa relation because the paternity of her children remains doubtful. Women aspire to become a zulwa for some financial stability and love, and also for the paternity of their child. Men, however, are wary of taking these women as zulwa and holding financial as well as paternal responsibilities. A jogtin in a zulwa relation is also considered more pure than the one who is outside a zulwa-relation.

A jogtin is considered fit for no other occupation besides entertainment through sexual and religious means. While upper castes appease the goddess through donation of a cow or money, lower castes are condemned to ward off the wrath of the goddess by dedicating their women. A jogtin's cultural labour is to sing and dance in praise of the deity and she must also perform this function while begging for jogwa. Thus, the devdasi phenomenon needs to be seen in a completely different light than that of prostitution as sex work, though both are seen as derogative. Brahmanical patriarchy operates such that there are different standards of purity for upper and lower caste women, and neither has any actual sexual agency. (Tambe 85-92)

The second issue is that of education. Although the education system is such by and large, the problem becomes compounded for Dalit students because of their historical exclusion from learning and knowledge. There is also the issue of violence which emerges from a growing educational status among the Dalits. Upper castes are often jealous of Dalits who may now be much superior to them educationally even though they may not own much land. Violence and clashes may break out as revenge by the upper caste men on what they perceive as a threat of growing educational status among the Dalits.

The third facet to focus on is access to water. Deepa Joshi in ‘Caste, Gender and the Rhetoric of Reform in India’s Drinking Water Sector’ writes how distribution of water systems have changed from community management in pre-colonial times, to management by the State in British as well as post-colonial times, to finally being handed over to private agencies. None of these systems however have been able to guarantee equitable water distribution to all. Dalit women have systematically been excluded from water resources even when they have been plentiful by the traditional casteist community and have been forced to walk for hours to fetch water from distant sources. When the water distribution system was managed by the State, the state gave the responsibility of looking after upkeep and maintenance of tubewells to women, as they were the most frequent users. However, they failed to distinguish between Dalit and upper-caste women. The result was that the upper-castes would allow no access to water to the Dalits. Water that was allocated for the Dalit community was also utilised by upper caste women. If the Dalits took water from their naulas, they were beaten and the water was considered polluted by their touch.

Thus, Dalits are first allowed no access to water and are further condemned for being dirty, which of course follows from the fact that they have no access to water. Private services too could not ensure equitable water distribution. Dalit women had no voice in the matter of water distribution and were systematically discriminated against. (Joshi 56-63). Even in school, children are discriminated against on account of such rules. Kalpana and Vasanth Kannabiran also note the incident at Thanjavur where Dalit children playing at a well were electrocuted by the upper castes.

The last and most obvious facet of Dalit women’s lives as represented in this poetry is the issue of untouchability. Forced into traditionally dirty occupations, they have no easy way out of them. This untouchability also prevents them from access to temples, which are considered sacred spaces. The paper discusses the representation of the four facets just discussed in the poetry under consideration. The paper also views the Dalits through the prism of being the “abject”, using the argument of Julia Kristeva and Mary Douglas. The abject is an aspect of the self which is estranged and treated as foreign or dirty. This could be strands of hair, broken nails, sweat, pus, vomit, menstrual blood, or at the larger societal level, Dalits. The link between the Dalits and the rest of the aforementioned body excretions is unmistakable. Considered as being dirty, they are forever condemned to clean other people’s dirt. The abject then is the

opposite of the “object” of desire. The abject is not desired, the abject is not an other, the abject is a part of the self which has been disowned, and which is treated as if it is non-self.

## **Water**

In ‘Liquid Tragedy: Karamchedu 1985’, Meena Kandasamy attacks the age old practice of banning Dalits from village wells and ponds and making them drink the water of the ponds where buffaloes bathe, urinate and shit. She refers to an incident as recent as 1985 in Karamchedu where a woman dares to question this injustice and hits forth with a pot. As a punishment for this, her oppressors let their fury loose and there are rampant rapes and killings and much violence. This also points to how the Dalit woman is seen as sexually available to upper caste men, and how raping a Dalit woman is often seen as a tactic for punishing and repressing the entire Dalit community. The poem, a tool of defence just like the woman’s pot, is itself written in the visual shape of a pot. Kandasamy again shows her ire against Gandhi who set a “rotten example” by suggesting that the Harijans, which in itself is a patronising term, should move elsewhere as they were not given water in this village. Gandhi’s suggestion is surely a compromise and an acceptance of defeat instead of a challenge to caste hierarchy. (Kandasamy 52)

‘One-Eyed’ shows us a little child having her eye knocked out for using touchable water. The pot, the glass and the water see just another noisy, eager and clumsy child, wanting to slake her thirst, but the teacher views this as breaking the rule, it becomes a medical emergency for the doctor, and the press advertises it far and wide. (Kandasamy 41) This also shows that water itself does not discriminate, neither do the pot and the glass, it is human beings who discriminate. At least the press advertises it far and wide in Kandasamy’s poem whereas such cases are often simply repressed and do not even make it to the news.

## **Discrimination in Education**

‘In ‘An Angel Meeting Me’, Kandasamy describes an imagined encounter with a rosy cheeked, glowing faced angel who visits her and sees all the scars and marks on her body, and her twisted red ears and the fact that she has only one eye. Then the angel lifts up her skirt and sees the grossest violence of all. She then explains to him that this sexual abuse and violence is because she went to school. This shows the atrocities that educational institutions still mete out to little children just because they are Dalit girls (Kandasamy 118). Again one sees that one evil leads to another. As if discrimination in education was not enough, the little girls are sexually abused as a way of suppressing them and putting them down.

The poem ‘Aftermath’ is about the day she went to school after drinking six

glasses of orange juice on the day of the English exam, and threw up in the toilet in school, and the creamy white breakfast milk all became sour green vomit. Because of her brazen attitude, a rumour of morning sickness and pregnancy goes all around and before she knows it, girls younger than her point fingers and slander, teachers gossip in staffroom about her child, and everyone thinks her rage is because of the lover who jilted her. All the while, “you know the nauseous/truth of your thighs: you are virgin.” The truth itself is enough to make her nauseous, just like the pregnancy would have. The line is satirical and tongue-in-cheek. However, “they make you confess for your sins, they make you a scapegoat, a victim, they need you to be who they want you to be”. (Kandasamy 120-121) And thus the rumours and slander continue, and nobody believes in her innocence. Here there are only rumours but we see how a girl is harassed and tormented even for a possible pregnancy, even for one which does not really exists.

‘Emergency’ shows Brahmin women in Delhi braving water cannons, tear gas shells, lathi charges and other such leftover forms of colonial control in order to protest again reservation in education, especially in the field of medicine. Meanwhile, writes Kandasamy, their lower caste sisters, fully qualified, continue their professional practice elsewhere, perfectly capable of becoming paediatricians, cardiologists, physicians, dermatologists, endocrinologists, gynaecologists, and obtaining expertise in every branch of specialisation. (Kandasamy 19-20) The poem shows how caste reservations, which are meant as affirmative action, have themselves turned into a source by which Dalits are discriminated against, as they are believed to be less meritorious because they have slightly lower cut-off marks. The poem probably shows the anti-Mandal agitation in the 1990s, wherein upper caste women protested against the OBC (Other Backward Castes) reservations. The protests were primarily asking the extremely casteist question of “who will we marry” if ‘lower’ caste men become their classmates, thereby implying that marrying a ‘lower’ caste man was not even an option.

## **Sexuality**

In the poems above, one can see how Dalit women are sexually abused as a form of punishment even when they try to access water or education. But the sexual abuse of Dalit girls does not even need a reason. Their sexuality is wilfully constructed as being “loose”, a myth is created that they are “available”.

The poem ‘Narration’ mentions a rape by a landlord (Kandasamy 56), and ‘Shame’ again shows the humiliation of a sixteen year old whose body has been wrecked, and who resorts to fire, which was a purification test for Sita, and is irrevocably killed, there being nobody to save the poor Dalit girl, unlike the mythical Sita. As for the perpetrators of the crime, “Their Caste is a classic shield” as Kandasamy succinctly puts (Kandasamy 58). As a Dalit girl’s sexuality is constructed as being “loose”, it is always the woman’s fault, and the upper-caste

men enjoy impunity for all their actions.

In 'The Whore's Wedding', Kandasamy shows wedding guests gossiping and conjecturing as to how the whore, seen as a downtrodden filthy woman, would cheat the man, or kill him, or have a child through another man. Again, it is always the woman who is blamed for promiscuous sexuality. Kandasamy views this from the whore's viewpoint and shows us how she must feel, stuck in bed with her husband and having to fake love when she can probably remember ten other men who were better in bed. Kandasamy is satirical as ever, as she changes the perspective through which we view the incident. (Kandasamy 68)

In 'Mascara', Kandasamy writes about a call girl who has been forced into the profession and putting the mascara is the last thing she does as she gets ready "to die, / once more of violation". The mascara hides the "long buried / hazy dreams / of a virgin soul". Kandasamy uses the oxymoron "virgin" for a slut, to emphasise the separation between sex and love, between the body and the soul, that the soul may be a virgin, even if the body is not. This is reiterated in the lines: "Sex clings to her devadasi skin, / Assumed superficialities don't wear off". Kandasamy here views cosmetics as "war paints", reminding us that the warrior goddess Kali wears mascara too. (Kandasamy 128-129)

Anindita Sengupta in 'Brick Women' writes of sex workers, these women who are "always leaving", unable to find acceptance and tolerance. They are shown to have hunger spasms in their bellies, perhaps for food, perhaps for love. They "free-range" the streets lit up by night lights. The "glisters of sex" drips on businessmen's shoes as they drive home after visiting the brothel. The men visiting the brothels are not stigmatised. Only the women are. The "lords" buy the women for life and the women "wrench" the coins like love. They bring up their children as "money plants", worth only the bucks they can help bring in. It is a loveless occupation for women which they do only for the money, one for which they suffer exploitation as well as ostracism. These women might presumably be Dalit women as they are forced into such "dirty" occupations. (48) It must be mentioned here that this view is certainly not true for all sex-workers. However, in the case of Dalit women, this is often by force as they are already perceived as being loose and promiscuous women.

Aruna Gogulamanda in 'She was told!' writes about how Dalit women are not even allowed to wear a blouse so that every male can objectify her as a device and watch her. She was told to bend her back and not to walk straight, to make herself a bait, to toil in the fields all day long as a human machine deprived of food and water. She was told not to feed her baby and had to swallow the pain, her breasts pining to satisfy her baby's hunger. She was told to take the insults, jeers, beatings and assaults for being born a woman in a cursed clan. She was told to take the brutal brunt of sexist remarks, and assaults of her husband, as well as of her master or feudal landlord. She was told that she was a bad omen. Like a sanitary napkin, she was useful but disgusting. Her dreams, beauty and youth have all been sacrificed for the master. She is a silent witness to the hundreds of

deaths of her mothers, daughters, sisters- the death of their dreams, and respect as well as their bodies. Her calloused hands, unkempt hair, cracked heels and wrinkled hair tell the tale of living in fear all these years, of centuries and millennia of violence and death. She was told that she was dirt and filth. In this sacred land where thousands of goddesses are worshipped, this living, flesh and blood woman was called a Dalit. Whether it is access to essentials like food, water, or basic human dignity, the Dalit woman is denied all these. She is literally used as a “bait” to catch.

In ‘Beasts...!!’, Gogulamanda shows the Dalit woman as a prey being hunted by wild animals. We could also see these wild animals as being men, whether Dalit or of other castes. The Dalit woman would also be a prey for women of other castes. A jackal is shown to roam around the fence, grabbing a chance to feed on her body whenever she forgets to close the door. A dog full of lust dreams of satiating its hunger and waits impatiently on her doorstep to pounce at her. A wolf hides in the bushes, waiting to tear her apart, and feast on her to quench his thirst. A sly, three legged sniffer dog follows her. Added to this list of beasts are the police, who, despite their office, pull her into bed and rip her apart using third degree methods, and snores his way to thunderous sleep. She is merely a sedative for him. Gogulamanda writes that all the detergents of the world and all the water of the oceans would not suffice to wash away the stains of the sins that are committed by these beasts on the women of this country. The poem also shows that a woman, especially a Dalit woman, is always unsafe. Beasts wait to pounce on her at the doorstep as soon as she emerges from her house and even enter her house when she forgets to close the door. From lurking among the bushes, to following her around, she is shown to be unsafe in private as well as public space.

### **Pollution and Untouchability**

There are various aspects to this, the common thread being that the Dalit girls are always seen as polluting and degrading some mythical notion of ‘upper’ caste purity. The poem ‘Babies and Bathwater’ exposes religion for the hypocritical and farcical fraud that it is. The poem shows dead babies floating like “fish food” among the lotuses in the temple tank. These “just-born, just- dead babies” are presumably killed for their sex or their caste. (Kandasamy 13) The only response of the temple to this social evil is the purification of the temple tank water with chlorine. The poem shows the hollowness of religion which is based only on external appearances. In this poem, they are literally seen as polluting the water tank which needs to be cleansed and purified. Again, we see the connection between Dalits and water.

‘Facing the music’ is about a woman whose lover has been lynched, possibly because of an intercaste relationship, although Kandasamy does not specifically mention this. “Too weak for suicide, too meek for murder” the woman survives in a death-in-life condition. (Kadasamy 21) Kandasamy here overturns

the stereotypical image of suicide, and shows that suicide requires great courage. She tries to imagine he never died, keeping him captive and not letting him wander too far, as if he is still a flame lighting up her darkness, but the flame keeps flickering and the presence is more of a ghostly one. Shell-shocked and spell bound, the unshed tears are withheld in her blood as she remembers her lover being burnt alive into ashes and bones. A 'lower' caste person is seen to pollute the 'upper' caste man through marriage, which is the reason for the lynching. Here again, we see the blame being laid on the woman. Inter-caste marriage would break the "purity" of caste, and is, according to Ambedkar, the single most effective method of bringing about a dissolution or annihilation of caste.

The poem 'Eating Dirt' shows us a poor, starving woman who only tasted food in her dreams. At one point, she succumbs to hunger pangs and starts eating dirt, clay, chalk, citrus soap, raw rice, green mangoes, crayons, ash, crushed ice, powdered glass and rain scented soil. Her son, who follows after her, is shown as containing heaven, hell and earth in his mouthful of sand, as everything is either sand and dirt, or else crumbles to dust. (Kandasamy 18) The basic necessities of food and water are denied to Dalits. She might be denied gainful employment because her presence is seen as polluting. This may drive her to such a desperate condition. Here we see the intersection of caste, class, and gender that is seen in the discussion of poems by Nitoo Das, Sampurna Chattarji, and Nandini Dhar.

In 'Sacred Thread', a beggar woman, when asked what she has eaten, replies that she has eaten the remaining waste of a royal feast arranged for a three year old. Again we see the intersection of caste, class, and gender. We also see her being denied the basic necessity of food. Kandasamy describes the turmeric bath, the raw resplendent silk, the sacred thread tying ceremony, and the thousand and eight guests. The punch line and the satire come towards the end of the poem when she tells us that the three year old was a bull. (Kandasamy 84-85) This is clearly meant to show that Dalits pollute, whereas cows and bulls purify. A bull is sacred, whereas a Dalit is pollution.

In 'We Will Rebuild Worlds', Kandasamy uses the images of the holocaust and of shattered glass to describe atrocities such as the burning of forty four Dalits because they asked for handfuls of rice, of children electrocuted because they played near the well, or of poison and pesticide poured through the ears, mouth, nose of a man and woman, or of couples hanged simply because they loved across caste. They have several skins "filthy rich and stinking" which they can shed and put on at their convenience. But as is customary with Kandasamy, she voices her anger and outrage, and not merely her anguish over misfortune. The Dalits are determined to fight back and rage a revolution in which dreams will be "red hot" with revolutionary anger and will "scorch", "scald" and "sizzle". (Kandasamy 60) Hot fire can also perhaps be seen as an act of destruction, purification, and change. The sibilance also suggests the sound of crackling fire. Kandasamy goes on to say that here will be song and dance and revolutionary celebration. Their naked bodies close together are compared to "hands in prayer".

Prayers and dreams embody the vision of a revolution and music and dance rejoice in the act of recreation and change. Their words of “fury” are seen as starting a “forest fire”, which again ravages and destroys to pave the way for the new. The repetition of “f” and “r” also suggests the crackling of fire. Other poems discussed in the paper so far have either been satirical, or empathetic towards the plight of Dalits. This poem, however, is full of red hot fury and anger, a quality which is seen in writing by Dalits, but which one does not see when ‘upper’ caste people write about caste. This can be seen in a few poems that follow.

Chattarji, while not a Dalit woman herself, touches upon the plight of Dalit fisherwomen. In the poem ‘Slipstreams’, Chattarji shows a fish-woman reeking with the smell of fish. Fisherfolk in some states of India are from the oppressed Dalit caste. Even in other states, they come from ‘lower’ castes as the smell of fish is considered polluting and unclean. Thus here, the woman is burdened on account of her gender, class, and caste. The fisherwoman’s brine-soaked fingers are described as having become fishes themselves, and her dreams are shown to be full of quick, silver fishes, escape nets, baits and hooks and going beyond the weeds, out of reach. With an implicit reference to the story of Shakuntala, Chattarji writes that the fishes sometimes swallow rings of gold which are later discovered by kings, once the fish has been cut open. Smelling of fish, as she walks up the steps, weighed down by her load, in the midst of mist on an island where she lives, she is enveloped with a different sort of smell, with the smell of musk, as she touches the wetness of hands and mouth and the sagacity of a man’s lust. Wearing her new skin as a sort of perfume, as she flips her way through mud, she once again dreams of becoming a fish: “scale and shine / in a sea of brine” (Chattarji 90-91) Or, she could be a fish in an enclosed tank, in an aquarium, getting her feed routinely, all longing slowed down to this drift from end to end, and then back again. The longing of the fish in the dream can perhaps be linked to the girl’s own longing for life outside, beyond the confines of her current life which may resemble a fish being trapped in an aquarium. The longing of the girl is also for the man she loves.

Nitoo Das, though belonging to a lower caste community, however, does not write stringent poetry in the style of Dalit poets that we have seen above. Das’s style is more muted down and mellowed, measured and controlled. Like Chattarji above, Das too depicts fisherwomen in a few poems, coming from the fishing community herself. In certain other poems, she shows us other kinds of women whom might possibly be seen as being poor, Dalit women. Nitoo Das too shows a fisherwoman in ‘Storytelling I’, her body scarred with stories as a tied baby lolled at her back. Her feet are shown as being trapped in the thin waters among flat bubble leaves and strands of violet flowers. These water hyacinths are shown to stink like shit. With bent back, her feet trapped, and lolling baby, she tries to catch the squirming fish, just as her mother had done before her (Das 24). The fact that Dalits are condemned in certain occupations, such as fishing, also shows the seemingly inherent pollution.

Nitoo Das, in ‘Matsyagandha’ uses mythology, in a very unromantic

manner and shows the stark social and economic inequality in society through these myths. Das makes us realise that subjects in themselves may not be necessarily romantic or modernist per se, but it is through the treatment of these subjects in different ways that they acquire such characteristics. Matsyagandha is Satyawati, character from the Mahabharata, who is the mother of Vyasa, and the great-grandmother of the Pandavas and Kauravas. She is born of an apsara who was cursed to become a fish called Adrika. In the poem, the fish-woman Satyavati, who was adopted and brought up by a poor fisherman's family, gives a retort to the high-caste king Parashar, with whom she gives birth to Vyasa out of wedlock. Matsyagandha tells Parashar that she has grown up with fish, loves fish and smells like a fish herself. She tells Parashar who lusts after her that she works for a daily wage whereas he can afford not to. He has the luxury of leisure while she rows and fishes and sweats with her father. Parashar hates her fish smell and yet covets her, so he gives her boons of perfume. Matsyagandha indignantly claims that the "fake skin smell" (Das 5) of jasmines never fades away now, and she hates it as she paces palace halls alone, longing for her fish smell. The poem resonates at a deeper level as Das herself is from a fishing community in Assam, which gives a slight personal and autobiographical touch to the poem.

In 'Pollution:I', the pollution is caste. The title may be seen as being tongue-in-cheek as it tries to subvert the notion of caste as pollution precisely by seemingly following the norm and by stating that being born "low" caste is indeed a form of pollution. The poem is a bit surreal as readers are unsure whether it is a fish or a man, perhaps something similar to what was seen with Satyavati and Adrika in 'Matsyagandha'. The fishermen search for food in the waters within him. His name and body smell of his birth and caste which are shown to stick to him just like scales to a fish; they have become an inseparable part of him. (5-6)

Nitoo Das in 'Doiboki' and 'Portrait: III (Kinnari)' shows us homeless, wandering women who seem to be on the verge of madness, with hair in knots, turning "into an ill-/smelling saint in / parchment clothes" (9) making prophecies of drying women, leaking crops, and sore buffaloes. Kinnari wears marigolds in her rope-like knotted hair, and sings songs as children watch her pot-bellied walk. Doiboki has "scowling" hair and her betel-spattered lips explode sex words and mark her as being uncouth, coarse and vulgar. She sits in street corners with "glistening secrets" and "shifty eyed" knowledge. (10) Children ran after her as she would turn around and unbutton her blouse for them.

Nandini Dhar, in an interview with Sneha Chowdhury says that she sees feminism as linked to state, capital, class, caste and race, which she attempts to challenge through many of her poems. Dhar's 'To Say Without Uttering, 1959' is narrated by a little girl whose mother makes cowdung cakes for livelihood, and this is the reason why they are able to eat on all the days of the month. This once again shows the linkage of Dalits with a 'dirty' occupation such as making cowdung cakes. They are condemned for such occupations because their presence is considered as being polluting. Dhar writes that every part of the cow is

valuable, even the shit. Women stand in line for their share of cowdung the way they stand in line for water. The little girl watches her mother, fingers oozing with mud and cowdung, plaster the dung cakes on the walls of their house. She wonders how she, the daughter of zamindar Rajbahadur Pratap Chandra came to be in this state of rolling cowdung cakes like a lowly, Dalit bagdi woman. Dhar shows the casteism prevalent even in the minds of the rural poor. The woman Malatibala, rues her state; she has no oil in her hair, no gold on her skin, and the smell of cowdung follows her everywhere and does not even get washed away by baths. Only her accent and caste pride remain. The little girl refuses to let her mother touch her skin or her hair. The little girl narrates that none of the girls with red floral print frocks who she played with and from whose fathers's libraries she borrowed books knew that her mother rolled dung cakes. Wishing her hair had more colourful ribbons, the girl tells the others how earlier they used to have rice fields, a mansion, and a pond with fish with wings. The other girls laughed at her stories. They asked her why she did not go back if this is what she left behind. Dhar writes that memories were like barbed wire fences which grazed her hands each time she attempted to climb them. She had a family tree whose roots had been dug up, leaves torn, branches broken and charred. Dhar does not tell us exactly what had happened to them. The girl narrates that by rice fields she means a burning village with scorched land with ash and excrement. No number of stories that she tells can ever cover up or hide the pain of memory. She says that history was never too far away and she and her mother swept shards of it every evening. Her mother hid hers in a pot behind the mirror and the sindoor on the mantelpiece, but the little girl preferred to throw hers away.

There are also a few non-Dalit poets addressing the issue of Dalit-women through a few poems. However, Dalit women poets writing in English is a new development which could not be seen in the twentieth century. However there are still very few women poets addressing Dalit issues in English, and their tribe certainly needs to increase. The four facets of their writing and experience that the paper tried to highlight namely, lack of access to water, lack of access to education and related discrimination, sexual exploitation by zamindars and as devdasis, and the idea of "dirty" occupations, pollution and untouchability refer to the precarious position of Dalit women.

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# **WHAT MAKES YOU A “BRIDE”: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ASSAMESE FOLK BALLADIC BRIDE JONA GABHARU AND CHAUCERIAN BRIDE IN *THE WIFE OF BATH’S TALE***

**Gutimali Goswami**

## **Abstract**

The concept of a “bride” is undoubtedly a nexus of gendered ideologies. Though the core subject of this construction is a woman, the rules of being and performing are curated by a man. This paper engages in a comparative study of two unconventional brides, the balladic bride Jona Gabhoru from a Northeast Indian tribal community of Assam and the Chaucerian bride in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* from the west, who defied the stereotypical prescriptions and encouraged even the choice of “To be or not to be” a “bride”. The paper claims that both these characters reversed the role of a bride from being the object to the subject in the constitutional assembly of marriage with their set of questions and riddles presented to their respective grooms to be solved, so as to qualify as their choicest selection. The objective of the paper is to *destruct* the layers of gendered prejudices that manufacture the ideology of being a “bride”; proper and desirable, in our society. In due course, it also analyses various intricate social, economic, political, and cultural forces that contribute to the germination of this concept. It also introduces the readers with the malleable nature of it and encourages them to dismantle it when and if necessary.

**Keywords :** Bride, Jona Gabhoru, Assam, Wife of Bath, West.

Biologically, often a woman is defined as a womb, an ovary, and most importantly a female. One who is not a male. Simon de Beauvoir while stating, “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (Beauvoir 14) opened up a new space where we now differentiate between the term female and woman. In her book *The Second Sex* the first chapter entitled “The Biological Data”, focuses on the biological aspect of the human species. Here, after providing us with a detailed analysis supported by many facts and formulae, she concludes by stating that it is almost impossible to posit and determine the primacy of one sex on the basis of the roles played so as to propagate and perpetuate the species. Hence, it needs to be scrutinized under the light of the ontological, economic, social, and psychological context. To do the same, the second volume of her book deals with various lived experiences which she had further divided into four parts namely: Formative Years, Situations, Justifications, Towards Liberation. She states about various forces and its subsequent effects that conditions and molds a woman as a female being. Passivity is taught as an essential trait to be determined as a

feminine being. This leads to a constant conflict between the autonomous existence and what Beauvoir terms as “being other” (111). Renouncement of her autonomy becomes essential as she is being taught to please thereby turning her from a subject to an object and almost to a living doll. However, she also puts forward a very interesting aspect that when a girl child is brought up by her father she is often found to be out of this vicious circle and defects of femininity. But the society doesn’t spare any work as a repressive apparatus thereby training them to respect the hierarchy of sexes and to accept herself as a condemned, mutilated, and frozen existence. She is educated about her identity as a woman rather than a female, a gender rather than sex.

Irrespective of her frustration, disgust, or indifference to this institution, one of the most essential reference points for a single woman is marriage. As mentioned in chapter five, Beauvoir regards it to be the destiny offered traditionally to every woman by society. With the idea of marriage comes first a set of rules to be followed by a bride. A few of such imperious demands made by paternalistic ethics across societies are the need to be delivered the bride as a virgin and an obligation to provide her with a dowry. Also, neither a tomboy nor a bluestocking is a good bride. A bride should also not be audacious, intelligent, or have much of either courage or culture. Rather a feminine one, who is weak, futile, passive, and docile were some of the societal qualifications laid for a perfect bride. In short, a girl is supposed to make herself a prey to make herself a catch.

Assam, a Northeastern state of India, is made of a multi-ethnic society. Traditionally a rural society by nature, this society had strong sentiments of caste, community, locality, and kinship. Though the absence of various evil practices like dowry, child marriage, and *sati-dah* made it considerably a breathable society for the women yet the brides of ancient Assam had to follow certain traditions and abide by various strict rules to qualify themselves as a perfect one.

Since the Vedic times, the caste-based society of Assam has practiced concepts like *Anuloma* (Hypergamous) and *Pratiloma* (Hypogamous) which essentially denigrated women. *Anuloma*, a marriage where an upper caste groom married a lower caste bride was an approved and accepted marriage. On the other hand, *Pratiloma*, a marriage where a bride of higher caste or ritually purer group married a lower caste groom was a strictly unacceptable one thereby leading both the groom and the bride to a lower caste, status, and consideration of being impure. Another Assamese societal symptom was the differential status of the bride-giver and the bride-taker. Here, the former was regarded as inferior to the latter, in due course objectifying the bride. Marriage also imposed on the bride, the groom’s caste, the recommendations, and the prohibitions that came along with it.

*Āi lahekoi khoj kārhībā, khojat podum phulābā,  
Podum pāte pāte sonar sangsār racibā  
Gosāi ghoru mocibā, sodāi sāki jolābā,*

*Śāhuk bhakti koribā, śohurak bhakti koribā  
 Ālahi āhile hāhi mukhere ulābā,  
 Deor nanad hotok moromere mātibā  
 Morom dibā jetiyā, morom pābā tetiyā  
 Buwārīr sin swarupe oronikhon neribā  
 Ghorkhonor mangal houk bhogobānok khātibā*

The above mentioned is an Assamese folk song sung while preparing a bride for marriage by her mother, instructing her how to behave and live a married life. The song starts by advising her of the gait of a bride, the work to do, and her behavior towards her in-laws. This song is an example of the pre-constructed normative behavior an Assamese bride should follow to qualify as a good bride and a wife. A girl is also trained to be a good mother because as the popular proverb states:

*Tik baladhā olāi mati, Māk bhālei jiye jāti*

This means a mother is held responsible for making a child's character and especially of her daughter's. A daughter is, therefore, to be trained by her mother to be a good wife, daughter-in-law, and finally attain motherhood.

Known for its rich culture, Assamese society is one made of diverse folk art, music, dance, drama, and literature. This composite culture is a storehouse of wonderful folk musical repertoire. Narrative songs or ballads form a major component of Assamese folk music and is commonly known as *Malita*. Prabhulla Dutta Goswami, in his work *Ballads and Tales of Assam*, had mentioned four categories of ballads viz. Magical, Realistic, Historical, and Satirical. *Jona Gabharur Geet* is the only ballad, according to Goswami, which can be regarded as a Magical Ballad. Nevertheless, due to the presence of certain historic references and heroic elements, this *malita* or ballad is often called a Historical Ballad.

Assam, often acknowledged as the settling land of numerous cultures and tribal groups had a greater Kachari group which encompassed eighteen major tribes of Assam, spread across both in plains and hills. They were Boro, Dimasa, Chutia, Sonowal, Tiwa, Garo, Rabha, Sarania Kachari, Hajong, Tripuri, Deori, Thengal Kachari, Hojai, Koch and others. During the medieval period, the Chutia kingdom of Assam had a princess named Jona and this is a ballad that narrates the tale of her marriage with a Kachari prince Gopichan. This paper is, however, based on a famous play *Bidrohi Jona* written by Golapchandra Bora based on the above-mentioned ballad.

Made of a total of thirteen scenes, this play begins with the idea of Jona Gabhoru's marriage which when proposed to her, she rejects out rightly. To this when her father Roja and her brother Obhimon questions her rejection (Bora 2), she starts by stating how the opinion of a bride is never taken into consideration because a girl is never regarded as a human who can speak and voice her mind. She says that the man they want her to marry is a king without character and is

greedy. When asked for proof of her statement and a witness, she is helped by her *sokhi* or friend Maloti who steps up and shares her experience with the prospective groom. She in detail explains how he tricked her lover to work in the fields and ultimately killed him. This cleared his way to her, who was then appointed as his maid to clean and dress him up. She also did not hesitate to speak about the episode where she was molested by the same. Courageous Maloti, however, did not fall prey and did escape by holding the king's sword and threatening to kill anyone who approached her or tried to stop her (pp.3-4).

Jona also mentions her disapproval towards the idea of multiple marriages and the presence of *tinipun kuwori* i.e., a total of two hundred and forty queens, the king (groom) had already gotten married to and whom she has to join, if in case she married him. She further talked about her abhorrence for *joutuk* or dowry that the bride's father agrees to give. She adds to it her concern about how a princess gets killed after marriage when and if her father fails to pay half of his *rajya* or kingdom (6).

To this when her father questioned if she had decided to remain unmarried and thereby send him to hell, she declared her will to arrange not a regular *swayamvar* but a test, where every king who dares to participate will be asked three questions to test their physical and most importantly their intellectual aptitude. Nonetheless, failing to answer them will come with a consequence which they won't be able to defy later, the consequence being imprisoned for life (6).

In the scenes that followed we saw nine hundred kings across Kamrup joining the contest and failing to answer the questions asked, thereby ending up in the prison cell. Enraged by this came Gopichan, the Kachari Prince, who couldn't accept a princess daring to rule over the kings and voicing her will in place of passively accepting her destined subordination (Scene 8). He decided to join the same, not to win another wife in form of Jona but to win her to treat her as a slave later and train her how a girl, a bride, and a wife is supposed to behave. Not paying much of heed to all his mother's attempt to demotivate him by calling Jona a *kulakhini* or a witch and a girl deformed physically (25), Gopichan joined the contest and challenged her to question him.

Her first question was to name a *sastra* that was written by a woman, which forbids a widow from remarriage and allows a man to do so. To this Gopichan replied correctly by declaring the unavailability of a text that qualifies the above-mentioned provisions (35). The second challenge was to punch a wall with his hands and push it back. Though impossible it seemed, Gopichan decoded the riddle in the question and punched the wall softly and pushed both his hand behind his back immediately (36). The third challenge was to uproot the biggest banyan tree in her courtyard with no help but one's muscular strength. Gopichan observed that the tree was used to tie elephants by the royal house and using this to his benefit, the night before the contest he broke the beehive that had already been formed in the tree. Poor elephants, when attacked by the bee, in attempt to

loosen their ties, had already pulled the tree enough to be uprooted the next morning when Gopichan had to push it to exhibit his prowess.

Capable of answering all the three questions, Jona had agreed to marry Gopichan and had left as a bride. But to her sheer surprise, just after reaching her husband's kingdom, he forcefully tried to chop her hair off as a sign of revenge against the humiliation she had done to his fellow kings. Jona, even as a bride, protested against this violence and rejected her husband's consideration of her being his property and him having all the rights over her, and hence also her hair. She declared saying that she isn't an unconscious and a non-living entity. She is very much alive and a human being of blood, breath, and voice. Before a man asserts ownership over his bride, he should consider the fact that a bride is a living being who is also responsible for giving birth to another life. What followed was possibly the most noteworthy exhibition of a feminist rebellion by a bride in a patriarchal society. She rubs her *sendur* or vermillion from her forehead and drops her resignation from the marriage she had just chosen for her, showing her free will, courage, and self-sufficiency to lead her own life. The play ends when she is accompanied by her friend Maloti showcasing the strength of female camaraderie and them announcing their quest for "a good man" (42-43).

Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* is a compilation of twenty-four tales narrated by a group of pilgrims as they travel together from London to Canterbury to visit the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket at Canterbury Cathedral. The first tale of the third fragment is one told by a lady known as Alison who is commonly referred to as Madame Gossip or Wife of Bath. As the prologue describes, she is a character who is very similar to our folk balladic princess Jona Gabhoru. Wife of Bath describes herself as an individual who follows the rule of experience over authority. To support this statement, she declares that she has had five husbands "at the church door" (Chaucer 188) and hence enough experience to be called an expert. Protesting against the Church and the societal norms, she states that Jesus wouldn't rebuke against her or her actions. This was because she by doing so was actually abiding by the biblical command to go forth and multiply. Breaking the stereotypical notion that a woman would rarely have any knowledge of the scripture, just like Jona, she went forth and challenged anyone to come up with the name of the scripture where God condemned widow remarriage and commanded virginity of a bride.

Mentioning her past husbands and their married lives, she discusses the need for a woman to have full authority and sovereignty, not just over her life but even over her husband. Her tale too was a reiteration of the same, where we are introduced to a lusty knight from King Arthur's court who rapes a young and beautiful maiden. On making a demand for justice, the law and the court decide to behead the knight. However, the queen and the ladies of the court decides to play a game with him and to allow him to determine his fate. Just as in our ballad, the knight was asked a question and was promised life if he could successfully answer the same. He was given a year to discover what women desire the most.

The year passes by and on his way back with a dejected soul, the knight finds a group of twenty-four maidens dancing and singing. As he approached them, he found none but an old lady. He informs her about his quest, and she agrees to help him with the correct answer and save his life. However, she demands him to fulfill her wish in return. He agrees and consequentially ends up getting married to her. The queen bids the knight and he responds with the answer he was provided by the old lady. He declares that it is sovereignty over their husbands that a woman desires the most.

Another episode from the same tale throws light on the idea of virtue and the physical appearance of a woman. On the wedding night, when the bride is ignored by her groom, in this case, the knight, the old lady questions her husband about his dismissive attitude towards her. He replies by saying that it is her poor appearance, her ugliness, age, and low breeding that had made him repulsive. She then explains how her ugliness and old age is an asset as she won't ever be able to allure any other man and remain forever a virtuous wife. She further offers him a choice, an old hag as she but a loyal wife or a beautiful woman but with possibilities of being unfaithful. To this the knight replies that the choice is hers; to lead a life she wants and the way she wants. Providing her with the correct answer and in a way, gifting his bride sovereignty over her own life, he is allowed to kiss her which turns her magically into a beautiful young woman and they live happily ever after.

Various hierarchical religious views or theories like Biological determinism which believed that human behavior was directly controlled by an individual's genetic or psychological composition, regarded women physically and mentally less able than men and hence needed to be "taken care of". Also, in nineteenth-century society, the archetype of an ideal woman i.e., the "angel in the house" as they would refer in the West and *Ghar ki Lakshmi* as they usually would in India, was very powerful.

According to Descartes, the subject is a thinking thing, which is not extended, and the object is an extended thing, which does not think. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* presents the idea of woman as other. She talks about a relational theory of femininity that asserts that the category of woman is defined by everything man is not. Man occupies the role of the self or the subject, and the woman is the object. He is absolute and essential, whereas, she is incomplete and inessential. This inferior destiny of a woman is taken for granted and propagated through various social, economic, cultural, political, and most importantly literary mediums so as to imprint it in the human consciousness. But as J.S. Mill had stated in "The Subjection of Woman", this inequality was a relic of the past, when the one mighty was regarded and accepted as the right one too. Times have changed and a clear reflection of it could be seen through various female characters of both our tales.

Two most important aspect that relates and reflects this change is the voice and choice of women. Silence, which is an opposition to any form of voice, be it

weak or strong, is a patriarchal construction for ideal womanhood. Silence is not a universal expression. It is a concept pregnant with a range of varied emotions. As Adrienne Rich in her book *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* states that in a world where the language is a symbol of power, silence could mean oppression and violence. Silence according to her could be a way of lying. Silence sometimes also is a form of outrage and protest as was in the case of Jaya, in the novel *That Long Silence* by Shashi Deshpande. This silence leads to complete negation of one's self finally leading to consequences which can be best explained by Indian synonyms of the English word silence, i.e. *muuk* (soundless), *neethar* (still) and *gopon* (secretive). Paulo Freire in his writings discusses the concept of 'culture of silence' where he claims it to be a pre-processed and pre-digested reality. Stating this culture of silence as a product of economic, social, and political hegemony and domination he especially draws attention towards double silencing witnessed by the First World and the Third World societies. This happened when externally these societies were silenced by the world and internally the elite sections of these silenced societies further silenced their weaker sections. Though it was evident in his work, that his concept was not in the context of gender and societal roles, however, the suggested measure to eradicate any form of silence from a society is one to be discussed. He regards education as an important tool to propagate or diminish any ideology in a society. He states that no education is neutral, either it trains to domesticate or trains to be free. He believes that education can be used as an instrument to decondition the outdated lessons and to recondition our society with the updated and revised ones. It is necessary to voice the voiceless and any expression of the female voice should never be suppressed or criticized. The female characters of both our narrations defied to be treated as mute and passive objects and rejected these traditional norms by voicing their self and soul. Jona Gabhoru along with Maloti, clearly voiced their opinion about marriage, dowry, remarriage and a perfect "bride". Courageous bride Jona did not succumb to the patriarchal pressure bestowed upon her by her father and her brother Obhimon. Rather she decided to "choose" her groom herself. She exhibited agency when she further imprisoned the ones who failed her test. Similar was in the case of "The Wife of Bath's Tale" when the raped maiden along with the queen and the ladies of the Arthurian court voiced their demand for justice. The "old" bride too, was seen exercising her sovereignty over her groom defying the norms of a Chaucerian society. She did not just rescue the lusty knight with the appropriate answer but also thereby successfully created an equal space in their relationship where both had the right of choice.

Another systematic and structured mechanism that is built on male superiority and female inferiority which helps in maintaining the patriarchal grip over women is domestic violence. Violence could be physical, verbal, economic, and emotional. Feminist theorists often refer to it by using terms like "wife-beating", "battered women" or "women abuse". Usually misinterpreted as a concept synonymous with conjugal violence or spouse abuse, domestic violence is one with a broader circumference. Female infanticide, rape, sexual assault, and dowry related violence are other branches of this concept where a girl is violated

against her will, even before she becomes a woman or gets married. In both the above-discussed plots, we see female violence. As a girl, Jona had to rebel and present proof of her statement to negate the groom her father had chosen for her. She had also presented her concerns against dowry and how a princess gets killed after getting married when her father failed to give half of his kingdom as dowry to the groom. Sadly, a strong female like Jona Gabhoru also had to undergo marital violence when her husband tried to forcefully chop her hair off. This was the revenge he wished to take for she had dared to imprison nine hundred kings being a woman. Maloti, a friend of Jona, was also a victim of an attempted sexual abuse from which she could barely save herself. *The Wife of Bath's Tale* had instances where a knight had raped a young maiden and Alison herself had undergone violence. To torture her emotionally, her husband forcefully read anti-feminist stories to her and make a mockery of women. In his retributive anger, he was also seen to knock Alison down to the floor. What is noteworthy in both the narrations is that both our female protagonists do not get emotionally or physically overpowered by their groom/husband and rather gains an upper hand over them. Jona stops the groom and breaks her marital engagement with him to debar him from having any authority over her and her body. Alison reciprocates by hitting him back and making him deaf for his entire life. Violence in any and every form is criminal and should be prohibited in a family and their respective societies. A behavioral order should be maintained for peaceful coexistence.

One noteworthy aspect which undoubtedly will help every woman to survive, sustain and live a fulfilling life is a female camaraderie. Because it augurs new social consciousness, female bonding can be regarded as the harbinger of women's movement. With this bonding, they not only liberate themselves from the suffocating conditions they exist in, but they also emerge as new beings. Maloti, the friend of Jona in our first tale, stood by her side during her defiance against all the patriarchal norms. She dared to voice her dark experiences and became a witness to her friend's conviction and statement. Similar was in the case of the latter tale.

To conclude, both the brides from the east and the west, i.e. Assamese folk balladic bride Jona Gabhoru and Chaucerian Brides in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* had to undergo a similar fate of behavioral and physical regulations, oppression of choice and voice, dowry and violence. However, both had the courage to rebel against these unjust stereotypes and thereby live their lives according to their will and norms. Indian philosophy calls the female energy both as *prakriti* and *shakti*. The former being a nurturer and the latter a source of power. Women across the globe should remind themselves about these binaries that exist within themselves and act accordingly, when and if needed.

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## A POSTMODERN FEMINIST INTERPRETATION OF *HALF OF A YELLOW SUN* AND *FRONT LINES*

**Punyashree Panda and Trina Bose**

### **Abstract**

*Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) by a Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and *Front Lines* (2016) by an American writer Michael Grant investigate the politics of gender construction and convention of gender roles framed in a conservative society. They portray a strikingly diversified world of females, where the stereotypical notions regarding gender are socially constructed by the patriarchy that subjugates women, using manipulative and archetypal androcentric discourses and social structure. Racism and ethnic division heighten the process of social marginalization of women as they fall victim to both racism and sexism and thus are doubly oppressed and peripheralised. But in the diverse world of women, those who are unconventional come out of their domestic circles to work in various significant social platforms. They fight a battle to get recognition in society only on the basis of their work, transcending the boundaries of feminine gender roles. They also come into conflict with the conventional women, who conform to typical female roles designed by society. Hence, these two sets of women are mutually exclusive in terms of opinion and attitude to normative culture and tradition. The present paper intends to interpret, through a close reading of the two novels under discussion, the clash between gender rigidity of an androgynous society and individual performance during the disruptive and tumultuous time of the Nigerian Civil War and the Second World War, and analyze what determines gender identity of a person from a Postmodern Feminist perspective and whether it reverses long-established notions regarding gender.

**Keywords :** Androcentrism, women, marginalization, gender identity, racism

### **Introduction**

Postmodern Feminism destabilizes set patriarchal norms and fights for gender equality and the interpretation of identity, and it also emphasises the relativity of gender identity in society, turning down the clichéd conceptions regarding sex and gender, and aims at achieving gender equality. The two twenty-first-century novels from very disparate social backgrounds namely, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and *Front Lines* (2016) by

Michael Grant, though a decade and continents apart from each other, can be investigated from Postmodern feminist viewpoints in analysing the roles and status of the female protagonists in the socio-politically chaotic and prejudiced time of the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) and the Second World War (1939-1945). The female characters of the two aforesaid novels are marked by heterogeneity that can broadly be categorized as conformist and non-conformist, and they suffer from misunderstandings and communication gap with each other resulting from their different economic, social, and educational backgrounds. The peripheral female characters of the novels like professor Odenigbo's rural Igbo mother, a village girl Amala, Frangie's mother, a poor black woman from both the texts, are conformists and are possible representations of what is normatively expected of women in society. Having internalized the patriarchal norms passed down to them, they are not in a position to recognize their marginalization. In contrast, the central female characters have rejected the typical gender roles designed in and by a male-dominated society. The principal female characters of both the novels are shown as actively participating in almost every sphere of life such as businesses, educational institutions, household duties, as well as war. This paper examines how, in the aforesaid novels, the diverse female world is impacted by racism, ethnic violence, and male chauvinism in the turbulent times of wars. It also looks at the collision between the orthodoxy of social structure and modernity of the revolutionary female characters who prove and free themselves from gender tags with performances in various commendable though sometimes unconventional places of their time and society.

In the novel *Front Lines*, the three central teenage girls strive to be soldiers on the front lines, and the novel details their sufferings, psychosomatic struggle, and valour in the battlefield of the Second World War. The girls named Rio Richlin, Frangie Marr, and Rainy Schulterman are from different backgrounds, religions and cultures. Rio is a White girl from a small town in northern California, Frangie is a Black girl from Tulsa, Oklahoma that has its past with racism, and Rainy is a Jewish girl from New York. The young girls are expected, based on their physique, by some of the army officers they come into contact with, to perform the typical feminine gender roles endorsed by the conventional society. According to Simon de Beauvoir, "the most important question about woman and her body is not what she historically and biologically is but what she can become" (Shusterman 12). In *Front Lines*, there are indeed some obvious reasons behind the participation of the girls in the war as Frangie says: "I don't aim to kill anyone. I aim to try out for medic" (Grant 71). Rio joins the army to honour her dead sister. Rainy is Jewish and she wants to bring down Hitler by killing Germans on the battlefield. However, when they are on the front lines, they are not spontaneously willing to face the inevitability of death despite their hard training and psychological preparations and thus are not glorified or idealized as conventional war literature though they fight in one of the bloodiest wars of the world i.e., the Second World War.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Olanna and Kainene, the two central characters,

are poles apart from the traditional Nigerian female world. On one hand, Olanna who sincerely loves Odenigbo seeks certainty and security in her relationship with Odenigbo when it is at stake because of the supernatural fetishes of Odenigbo's mother, and on the humanitarian ground, takes the responsibility of Baby, who is an illegitimate child of her boyfriend Odenigbo. But in contrast, Olanna appears as a revolutionary and strong character like her twin Kainene when the situation demands so; for instance, she refuses the proposal of indirect prostitution for a business profit of her parents. She also does not spare Odegnebo for his betrayal and sleeps with Richard, Kainene's boyfriend for taking revenge. But later she regrets this when she realizes her mistake in choosing Richard, who was her sister's boyfriend, as a sexual partner. She is quite rational about relationships, love, and mutual trust, and that can be perceived when Odenigbo goes to her looking troubled and informs about Amala's pregnancy, Olanna starts laughing. Olanna refuses to let Odenigbo present himself as the victim in that context, as it is quite clear to her that the real victim is the rural girl Amala, "who did not have a voice" (Adichie 250). While arguing with Odenigbo about his betrayal she says, "I never blamed Amala" (Adichie 246). She again says: "It was to you that I had given my trust and the only way a stranger could temper with that trust was with your permission. I blamed only you" (Adichie 246). In this situation, she is an epitome of psychic strength and power. She also protests against her father's wrongdoings and remarks that it is mean on his part to have a relationship with another woman, and in addition to this, he has purchased a house for that woman where Olanna's mother's friends reside. She blames him by saying that it is utterly wrong on his part as he visits that woman when his work gets over and his driver parks the car outside the house. He does not care for the society, and this is why such scandalous activity is like "a slap" (Adichie 218) on the face of Olanna's mother.

*Front Lines* portrays the horrors of the Second World War, and the narrative informs about a court decision taken in the United States of America, which, for the first time, approves women as subject to the draft and eligible for service as soldiers in war. Mathis also discusses:

In World War II, the government used propaganda to communicate the need for changes in women's roles for the duration of the war. These changes enabled women to enter factories by the millions, and proved that women were capable of much more than having babies and washing dishes. The propaganda certainly helped the government to achieve its goal of mobilizing American women. (94)

But in *Front Lines*, the hypocrisy and chauvinism of the male-dominated society stand exposed as the common people also like the male soldiers comment sarcastically about the girls in the army that they "must want to be raped by some of them Japs, yeah, that's what she wants" (Grant 76), and thus they view this unconventional endeavour of the girls in a negative light. It is as if the sexualised body of a female is the only and the most pertinent thing to be taken seriously into consideration even after such a radical decision of the government. As

Spivak remarks, that "...between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernization" (102). In *Front Lines*, according to social orthodoxy, the body of a female that can be violated sexually becomes the primary marker of identity for the young girls who are going to the front lines and who are as ready to fight their enemies as their male counterparts.

As rural women like Odenigbo's mother Mama and Amala in *Half of a Yellow Sun* are far away from modernity. They are unaware of and powerless enough not to bother with or critically judge the long-established social customs and beliefs. The two sets of characters, i.e., the traditional and the modern, in the novel can be regarded as two binaries or at least as not at all alike. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the rural women are superstitious and conservative, and they do not approve higher studies for women. Odenigbo's mother does not endorse the unconventional notion that women can be equal to or better than men or can control or defy men. It is also pointed out by Folashade Yemisi Fashakin that, "among most Africans, men have been culturally constructed as natural born leaders and head of the families while the woman is seen as the other "sex, the subordinate one in the relationship" (12).

The presence of Odenigbo's mother in the text highlights her generation's obliviousness about such socio-political peripheral status of women in the androcentric African society, and thus they retain their unquestioned loyalty towards age-old social practices. Bell Hooks opines in "Racism and Feminism":

American women have been socialized, even brainwashed, to accept a version of American history that was created to uphold and maintain racial imperialism in the form of white supremacy and sexual imperialism in the form of patriarchy. One measure of the success of such indoctrination is that we perpetuate both consciously and unconsciously the very evils that oppress us. (374)

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the traditionalist village women like Odenigbo's mother and Amala have similarities with these aforesaid Americans as unwittingly they are the victims of "interpellation" (xxviii) in the Marxist critic Louis Althusser's term. Ironically, Olanna is looked down upon for her university education by Odenigbo's mother who says: "Too much schooling ruins a woman; everyone knows that. It gives a woman a big head and she will start to insult her husband. What kind of a wife will that be?" (Adichie 98). She further remarks that girls who go to university for pursuing higher education "follow men around until their bodies are useless" (Adichie 98). This is how Olanna has been thrust upon herself the identity of a morally ruined "loose woman" (Adichie 98) owing to her higher education. It is analysed in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* that "the construction of 'third world women' as a homogeneous 'powerless' group often located as implicit victims of particular socioeconomic systems" (Mohanty et al. 57), and such type of oppressive homogenizing

discourses of Western feminism can also be found in *Half of a Yellow Sun* as it is evident from the perceptions of Susan, an English expatriate, according to whom, all Black women, including Kainene, are equal and powerless. However, this type of exploitative discourses of racism and sexism appears to be irrelevant in the context of the Igbo female world of *Half of a Yellow Sun*. It explicates the heterogeneity and juxtaposition of Olanna and Kainene who are individualists to the rural and uneducated women like Amala and Odenigbo's mother who does not suffer from any sense of marginalization and powerlessness in the male-driven society and blindly supports the societal system, serving as a representative image of the conservative African woman.

Ethnic divisions frame the fragmented and segmented structures of society in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Henry Louis Gates reflects on the expansion of the problem of 'the colour line' formerly mentioned by Du Bois:

Ours is a late-twentieth-century world profoundly fissured by nationality, ethnicity, race, class, and gender. And the only way to transcend those divisions –to forge, for once, a civic culture that respects both differences and commonalities—is through education that seeks to comprehend the diversity of culture. (xv)

On the one hand, *Half of a Yellow Sun* which is set against the backdrop of the Biafran War reveals the aforementioned sort of fissures and cracks in the society. Women are exploited in inhumane ways for their ethnic differences during the Biafran War, and the war plays as an opportunity for violent rapists to satisfy their crooked desires. Women of both Igbo and Hausa tribes are sexually exploited amidst the destructive war. On the contrary, Kainene who is an educated Igbo crosses her racial boundary to embrace her lover Richard, an English expatriate, despite the opposition of Igbo society to such an interracial relationship. When Richard feels helplessly weak in front of racial hostility of the Igbo towards his relationship with Kainene, Kainene replies to Udodi, in cold yet clear English, that "my choice of lovers is none of your business, Udodi" (Adichie 80), and in this context, Kainene is a fearless girl who asserts her free will and thus successfully combats racial stereotyping and violence.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the postcolonial Nigerian society is dominated by the evils of racism, religion, gender, nationalism, and in *Front Lines*, such social malice also shapes the lives of Frangie and her mother who are from the marginalized section of society due to their race and poverty. When Frangie, a peripheralized coloured girl joins the army, she receives both encouraging and derogatory remarks. Sergeant Tell remarks: "Girls in the army. Never thought I'd see..." (Grant 85). Then he ignores it and again, in a stern tone, says: "Look, ladies, it's not sir. Sir is for officers. I work for a living. You call me sergeant" (Grant 85). Here, his remarks can be taken as a positive one. The narrative informs that it is just over five years since the courts decided that woman may serve, and just over a year since deciding that women must serve as soldiers. The government feels it necessary to appoint women as soldiers and tries to rise above the biases and prejudices in the crucial time of war. But chapter Eight of

the novel begins with the line that “women soldiers are an abomination” (Grant 91). This is a typical remark of biased patriarchy that does not consider women as worthy or capable of being a soldier. In *Front Lines*, on the battlefield, Frangie helps the helpless while the male officers criticise her with derogatory remarks without offering any help to the ones in distress, and thus she comes across as the one who retains the essential humane qualities. Like the instance mentioned above, many more such contexts from both the novels ensure that the unconventional female characters of both the novels prove themselves to be morally superior to men in terms of their kindheartedness and responsibility. The female soldiers like their male counterparts, struggle in the front lines, but instead of glory that is reserved for men, they are scorned. Rio wishes to be appointed as a driver but is assigned on the front lines for fighting. Frangie tries her level best to become a medic yet her gender and race prevent her, and Rainy who is multilingual, gets appointed to work in intelligence. Their sufferings and toil on the battlefield get intensified due to social injustice and gender discrimination in the military.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the black skin colour of a girl is contemptible for a white person (like Susan) as well as not psychologically desirable by a Native African (Ugwu for example) who yearns for a white-skinned woman in his subconscious. Ugwu, Odenigbo's houseboy is impressed by the light-skinned beauty of Olanna. It is as if white skin colour is still considered superior even by a Native to the more prevalent and organic black skin, even after the end of the colonial period. Biased personal observations based on race can be found in *Half of a Yellow Sun* where Kainene, an educated girl, is considered by Susan only in terms of her skin colour, and Susan can only perceive Kainene along with her culture as a change of taste for an Englishman like Richard. She cannot make out how a white-skinned Englishman can have a genuine attraction for a black-skinned tribal woman. She says to Richard, “But I did want you to know that I shall keep busy while I wait for you to finish with your dusky affair” (Adichie 237), and in such an assumption, she disregards Kainene’s capabilities. According to Christopher J. Schineider, “...postmodernists argue that all knowledge is seen as subjective and is always influenced by personal, cultural, and political values” (95), and such Postmodernist view can be perceived in *Half of a Yellow Sun* as Kainene is judged by Susan based on a prejudiced view and partial truth, which only includes her African origin but does not incorporate her education, profession, and independence. By associating an Igbo woman with mere sex, Susan lives up to the stereotype imagined in a racist mind. In “Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: I Became Black in America,” Hope Reese has pointed out that in this talk on racism, while talking about her own real-life experiences about racism Adichie says: “I wasn't black until I came to America. I became black in America” (n.p.).

The insidious influences of racism can be felt in *Front Lines* and the word ‘black’ is used several times; it sounds unpleasant as it connotes negativity and inferiority in almost all the situations. For example, a white lady like Miss Ellie

considers Frangie and her mother Dorothy Marr as inferior squarely due to their race. She insultingly says, "I reckon I could scour my pans bright with that brushy Nigra hair of yours" (Grant 36). A woman like Miss Ellie pays Dorothy Marr for her labour, and she does not even forget to complain about the dress as it is mentioned by Frangie. Even when Ellie insults Frangie, her mother remains silent and tolerates and this confirms the authenticity of Nasrullah Mambrol's interpretation of Hooks's views regarding racism and black identities as he points out:

Employing a critique of essentialism allows African-Americans to acknowledge the way in which the class mobility has altered collective black experience so that racism does not necessarily have the same impact on our lives. Such a critique allow us to affirm multiple black identities, varied black experience. (n.p.)

In *Front Lines*, in utter frustration, Frangie says that "one did not talk back to white folk or object to words like pickaninny or Nigra, no, not even when it was your daughter being referred to with casual condescension and unearned familiarity" (Grant 37). The mother is too powerless to complain about her own daughter's unjustified humiliation. Frangie is fed up with their ways of living and hopes that "maybe it'll be different in the army" (Grant 37). While Frangie imagines that she might escape discernment in the public sphere such as the army, even in that glorified space, she is called a Nigra by the military officers. Frangie has strong will-power to become a medic despite her physical weaknesses and lack of strength of wielding a gun. Frangie is unlike her submissive and traditional mother, Dorothy Marr who suffers from racism, but silently puts up with it. Teresa E. Ebert comments that "every woman, in and of herself becomes individual and unique in her particular race, class, national and age possibility—that is, in her difference from other women" (902). In both the novels under discussion, the female protagonists are strikingly discrepant from each other having quite dissimilar types of an identity crisis and facing similar yet varied sorts of invisibility due to racial and sexual discrimination in a male-centred society.

Though Frangie's mother tolerates abuses, she encourages her to continue her studies and prepares herself to be a doctor. She argues that as there are "a lot of coloured doctors around" (Grant 37), Frangie can also try to be a doctor. This is said in such a way as if it hints that coloured people who had been neglected and deprived before in society have now progressed academically in a good number. The word 'coloured' seems to be given extra emphasis in this particular context. Doon criticizes her by saying that so many people still didn't believe females belong in college, let alone "coloured ones" (Grant 45). Thus a coloured female is doubly marginalized for being female and as well as for being Black, and Frangie seems to have two prominent social identities, i.e., a female and black, thrust upon her by the representatives of the prejudiced society that might overshadow her identity as a soldier.

*In Front Lines*, there occurs a reversal of traditional customs and beliefs in

presenting the three females on the front lines of the Second World War. Rainy thinks:

It has always been that the men went off and the women kept and waved. There is no blueprint for what is happening now. There is no easy reference point. People don't know quite how to behave, and it's worse for the men in the station who are staying behind and feel conspicuous and ashamed. (Grant 92)

When Rio joins as a soldier, the narrative informs about Rio's hair cut that "her black hair is cut short, almost as short as a man's" (Grant 110). While it has been tried to give the girls looks of a typical army man and similar responsibilities, army Sergeant Tilo Suarez comments negatively, the presence of women in the army is "a mistake" (Grant 199). According to Rainy, the expression "virtue of their sex" (Grant 102) is perhaps designed for deliberate misinterpretation by Colonel Derry as he addresses to the soldiers that "a natural order that has decreed that woman shall bear children and tend the hearth, while men shoulder the harsher burdens of life's vicissitudes" (Grant 102). These are the expected and usual gender roles of men and women in a norm-driven society, and the rigid and egoistic male world intends to continue old belief-systems to retain their position and dominance over females by limiting them within domestic circles. The marginalized soldier girls combat such repressive notions and win on the battlefield with their performances.

*Half of a Yellow Sun* depicts Nigerian tribes, and simultaneously, it resists any stereotyping or glorification of the so-called exotica explicating the social evils and injustices. Olanna and her twin Kainene, are economically independent as Olanna is a professor of Sociology at Nsukka University, and Kainene initially runs her father's business and then a refugee camp when the war begins. Sadia Zulfiqar remarks that Olanna and Kainene are independent women and "they are the real political agents in the novel, the driving force of the narrative" (97). Progressive characters like Aunty Ifeka, Olanna, and Kainene are conscious of their rights and status in social life, and they are writers of their history by not conforming to the stereotypical feminine roles and codes of conduct fixed by society. For example, in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Olanna lives with Odenigbo without marrying him. Kainene falls in love with Richard, an English expatriate, going against racial prejudices prevailing in Igbo society. When they are betrayed by their boyfriends, they do not remain passive. Olanna's aunty Ifeka asserts unconventionally when Odengbo, Olanna's lover deceives Olanna by sleeping with Amala during her absence. She says: "You must never behave as if your life belongs to a man. Do you hear me? Aunty Ifeka of Olanna said. Your life belongs to you and you alone, *soso gi* (sic)" (Adichie 226). Quite confidently, she remarks about her principles that her life will change only if she wants to change it.

The portrayals of the society of both the novels inform that the conservative sections consider sex as the only determiner of gender identity while race and social status also serve as tools of further marginalization. Silke von der Emde remarks that "Morgner does not deny the existence of differences between men

and women and between individual persons, but she shows that these differences are always operative in specific political situations and can never be locked into fixed categories" (123). But the politics of androcentric society confuse and problematise gender and sexuality by equating them as identical in the two novels under discussion. In *Front Lines*, the girls who refuse to give up despite humiliations and criticism and join the army preparing themselves for the war confirm Jane Flax's observation that "the experience of gender relations for any person and the structure of gender as a social category are shaped by the interactions of gender relations and other social relations such as class and race" (623) as true.

Therefore, in the two novels under discussion, progressive women are treated as a marginalized section of society, and whenever they try to cross their limits that are determined by the orthodox society, they are humiliated. Patricia Waugh remarks that there lies "...in postmodern the only possibility of critique and opposition from the margins which gives a voice to feminists, post-colonials, ethnic, racial and sexual minorities" (348), and the stability of a position in society can be gained with repeated performances as it is explained by Judith Butler, an American gender theorist. As in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler remarks:

When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a floating artifice, with the consequences that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one. (6)

In *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Front Lines*, the central female protagonists, who had so long been peripheralized despite their abilities, attain identities based on their "repeated" (Butler 7) performances and works reversing the set societal notions regarding gender roles.

## Conclusion

The racially marginalized and sexually oppressed yet struggling nonconformist female characters of both the novels affirm, with their performances in numerous significant fields, that race or biological construction has no role in forming social or gender identity. They fight not only with the male-driven society but also with the sections of conventional women of unquestionable loyalty towards conventional social rules and regulations, perhaps due to ignorance or fear. Though such unorthodox females are different from each other based on their diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, they prove themselves to be far better than their gender-assigned roles. Thus despite overt gender-biases and racial prejudices of the two novels, the active presence and unusual professions and performances of the strong female characters discussed from the aforementioned novels can be interpreted as a kind of reversal and refutation of the age-old social organism of male dominance and female inferiority in society in the name of gender, a biased social construct.

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## **TRANSFORMED ROLE OF JEWISH AMERICAN WOMEN IN JUDAISM: READING REBECCA GOLDSTEIN'S *MAZEL***

**Bhaskar Lama**

### **Abstract**

In the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, the Jewry from Eastern Europe and Russia migrated to America with dreams in their eyes and hope in their hearts of a better life for themselves and their family members. Religious persecution and socio-economic factors compelled them to dissipate into countries that provided them with opportunities for progress, especially America. They made some adjustments in their lifestyle, but would not wholly surrender their religious beliefs. Nonetheless, some reforms were brought about within their religion which impacted their individual and domestic lives. When these reforms were carried out, the voice of Jewish menfolk could be heard, loud and clear, but the voice of Jewish women was missing. The latter were oppressed in the hands of patriarchy in America too, as they were before moving there. Gradually, with the reforms in Judaism, the condition of Jewish women started to change along with their perspective towards Judaism. The first-generation Jewish American migrant women were not interested in Judaism as it debarred them from participating in it and curtailed their freedom. The second-generation women were involved in career-making and improving their public life, so they were indifferent to Judaism. Paradoxically, it was the third-generation Jewish women who showed a keen interest in Judaism from which the first and second-generation warded off. This essay focuses on the changing role of the Jewish American women towards Judaism in the twentieth century. It examines the reasons that necessitated the third-generation Jewish American women to participate actively in the religious tradition as opposed to their predecessors. In this context, the essay does a literary analysis of Rebecca Goldstein's *Mazel* (1995), employing the theoretical framework of identity, racism and feminism.

**Keywords :** Judaism, Jewish American Women, Torah, Mazel, Rebecca Goldstein

### **Introduction**

Jewish American women writing emerged as a resistant voice to the hoary patriarchal tradition. The works like Irving Howe's *World of our Fathers* (1976)<sup>1</sup> go on to show the role of Jewish men in forming the Jewish American society.

The literary representation always had Jewish male as a centrepiece. Even if there were female protagonists, like in the works of Mary Antin and Anzia Yezierska, at the beginning of the twentieth century, they were confined to the family chores. They did not have access to the main sanctum of the family which carved the Jewish identity, i.e. the religious front. It is the religion/Judaism which gave the Jewish fathers right to claim over everything that made up the Jewish life in America. Hence, the Jewish feminists sought for a book which would talk about “the world of our mothers” (Avery 4). There were many positive changes in the lives of the American Jewish women with the reforms brought in the religious and social front.

The traditional Judaism was orthodox, in form and practice. When Judaism evolved into other forms like Conservative and Reform, there were changes accordingly, in terms of approach to Torah<sup>2</sup>, the Jewish religious book, and the inclusion of secular aspect in it.<sup>3</sup> The religion grew quite flexible towards Jewish women who could participate in the limited functions of the religion from which they were debarred earlier. The essay points out that the modern American Jewish women, especially the third-generation of the migrants, do not simply participate in Judaism, rather they take recourse to Orthodox Judaism. It argues that the modern Jewish American women, who have access to modern education, recline in the traditional faith to dig into their history and recount their participation. Secondly, in multicultural America, going back to the roots is also a process to reclaim one's identity.

Thus, the essay examines problems like women's role in Judaism, their fight with racism and patriarchy, their balance of modernity and orthodoxy. To do so, it is divided into three sections: first, it reflects on Jewish women's position in the religious space in general; second, it deals with Jewish women in America, and issues of modernity, racism and identity; finally, it examines the text, Rebecca Goldstein's *Mazel*, highlighting the crucial issues, arguing the need of modern Jewish American women to take recourse in Orthodox Judaism.

### **Jewish Women in Religious Space: Patriarchy and Gender-bias**

Traditionally, the Jewish law called *Halakhah*,<sup>4</sup> derived from the Torah, administered every aspect of Jewish life and expected the Jews to fulfil their religious commitment by following the precepts and commandments of God (*mitzvah*)<sup>5</sup>. It specified their duties, domestic and religious, which included monitoring the conduct of men and women. Given that men were privileged in this, there was prevalent gender-bias towards womenfolk. Norma Fain Pratt writes that *Halakhah* was guided by patriarchal order, and “women's role in life was defined as caring for her husband, children, and home” (211). To be born as a girl was considered a “sad” in Judaism. Jewish men would thank their stars that they were born as men and not women. In this context, Hana Writh-Nesher writes: “The Torah left by Moses is the heritage of the children of Jacob...” and males recite it in their morning prayers, “I thank Thee, Lord, for not having

created me a female" (73). Ann Braude expresses her dismay that the Jewish women were excluded from religious duties in traditional Judaism. She writes that in normative rabbinic Judaism "women could not be counted in the *minyan* of ten adults required for public prayer." Accordingly, they could not say a prayer for the dead (*kaddish*), nor could they serve as a witness. In the synagogue, women were secluded behind the barrier (*mechitza*) far from men who read from the Torah. Married women were supposed to "wear wigs to hide the attractiveness of their own hair" (112).

In Judaism, women were dehumanized of their emotions and pains, their individuality and experiences were not valued, and they were seen as a source of sin. Judith Plaskow writes that Judaism is a "deeply patriarchal tradition" (xiii), in which "women's experiences have not been recorded or shaped the contours of Jewish teaching because women do not define the normative community" (8). In other words, Jewish women have never had the chance to represent or speak about themselves, but have always been "seen through the filter of male interpretation" (8). They have been treated as non-entity, writes Cynthia Ozick recounting her experience of Sabbath in "Notes Toward the Right Question: A Vindication of the Rights of Jewish Women":

In the world at large I call myself, and am called, a Jew. But when, on the Sabbath, I sit among women in my traditional shul and the rabbi speaks the word "Jew," I can be sure that he is not referring to me. For him, "Jew" means "male Jew"....When the rabbi speaks of women, he uses the expression "Jewish daughter."...."Jew" signifies adult responsibility. "Daughter" evokes immaturity and a dependent and subordinate connection. (qtd. in Braude 134)

So, the Jewish women did not have any say either in the religious matter or in domestic affairs. They were supposed to dutifully obey their husbands and carry out household chores.

The Jews have always been a victim of religious persecution and racism. They were persecuted throughout history for being non-believers/non-adherents to "the New Israel" or Christian faith. They were seen as murderers of Jesus Christ, and the doctrine of Saint Augustine suggested that "the conversion of the Jews was a Christian duty and essential to the salvation of the world" (Fredrickson 19). They were "demoniz[ed]" and executed, and their communities were "pillag[ed]" (20). The racism towards Jews was predominantly "exclusionary" in nature, and they were tolerated until they remained within their ghettos. When they moved out from the ghettos, it incurred unwarranted punishment in various forms, especially due to the furore of anti-Semitism among non-Jews. To consider that these problems were merely faced by Jewish men and would have no impact on Jewish women is to foreground a naïve statement. The Jewish men would make the Jewish women the beast of burden; vent the frustration of the outside world in the domestic space.

The struggle of Jewish women needed an outlet to address many of these

problems, on different fronts—religious, domestic, economic and social. When the Jewry moved to America in the hope of better life and freedom from various parts of Europe, particularly eastern Europe and Russia, this also provided an opportunity to Jewish women to enhance their lives at multiple levels. However, the progress was not immediate, and they had to face gender-bias and racial problems. These shall be taken up in the next section.

### **Jewish Women in America: Modernity, Racism and Identity**

The migration of Jews in America did not immediately improve the quality of their lives. The condition of Jewish women remained pathetic even after migrating to America as religious constrictions remained the same for them even there. They faced inequality everywhere, including the synagogues where the seating arrangements were such which “mirrored social and gender inequalities within the community and reinforced religious discipline” (Sarna 18). Women were not allowed to worship from the centre where the ritual was conducted. Instead they “worshipped upstairs in the gallery” (18) as per the Jewish tradition. They had no say in religious matters, and to silence their voices, they were disqualified from reading/studying the religious scriptures. However, there was a gradual change in the way Jewish women were perceived within Judaism and how Jewish women looked upon their religion. This was a result that came about due to the changes in the social, economic, and religious advancement in the lives of Jewry, and the internal reforms in Judaism.

Over time, the condition of American Jews improved from the initial days of migration. The gradual changes within Judaism were offshoots compelled by the need to adjust to the new world. The seeping in of modern education remoulded their traditional bearings. There were massive reformations within the structure of American Judaism like the induction of female Rabbis and the removal of barricades between male and female worshippers in the synagogues. These changes did not happen in the absence of Jewish women’s participation. Instead, they were overtly involved in bringing about the changes to improve their status quo within the community. Judith Plaskow writes that Jewish feminism had “emerged as a diverse and complex religious and social movement”, and they addressed “inequalities in Jewish life” (xv). They also discussed matters that concerned “ethnic, national and communal elements” (xv). Thus, the Jewish women had a massive responsibility and opportunity to prove that they were not just the passive recipient of established norms and traditions.

American Jewish women realized their potential and the necessity to speak up for their rights. Herschel writes that Jewish feminism is very much “American phenomenon” which grew “out of political movement for social change associated with the struggle against racism” (46-47). When Fishman writes, “[t]he Jewish women are intelligent, articulate and aggressive and they do not passively accept what fate has to offer them” (2), it embodies the language of a challenge to the

condescending attitude that Jewish men had towards Jewish women for ages. In Ozick's words, feminism is "equal worth of the sexes, before God and humanity and equal access to whatever needs doing in the world, or to whatever the world calls you to do?" (qtd. in Kauvar, "Interview" 1993: 372). Hence, the stand which Jewish women had taken was not to separate themselves from the religion, instead to participate in the religion to bring necessary changes. These changes would not be confined to the religious sphere but would connect to the domestic and social spaces.

The watershed moment that replicated in the changes of American Judaism, particularly for Jewish women, provided an opportunity to the American Jewish women to think about their family, identity and their role in Judaism. Modern American Jewish women, who were educated in modern institution showed intense interest in Orthodox Judaism. They wanted to participate in Judaism fully: to read religious books, to form *minyan*, and other activities of the synagogues. The question arises here regarding the burgeoning interest of these modern American Jewish women in Judaism. Why was it important for them to recline on the Orthodox Judaism which deprived Jewish women/them of their rights for ages? While Jewish women wanted more freedom, and their modern education provided them so, why did they look back upon religion which had restricted their 'being'? Before we answer these questions, we need to discuss Jewish American women in the context of the outside world and racism.

While the Jewish women had to fight a battle within Judaism, the outside world was another big challenge. The modern Jewish American women were not simply accepted by the mainstream "white" American women as one of them. This problem has its connection to the historical setting of Jewish immigration. The European immigrants were compelled to fit into the category of "white" and "by deciding they were white," (Roediger 330) they wanted to fit in to avoid racism meted out to the African Americans.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, as the Jews were a part of the "trading minorities" they had greater opportunity to develop a positive sense of non-white identity (336). They also knew that they did not have to face the danger of being branded "niggers" (337). Hence, they faced a different kind of racial discrimination, i.e. of exclusion. Essed Philomena and David Theo Goldberg write: "racism operates in relation to and through other systems of exclusion, marginalization, abuse and repression" (3). Thus, Jewish American women met racism through exclusion when they participated in the women's movement of the 1960s. It was professing of their religion which brought in anti-Semitic feelings from the others. Despite that, Jewish women became more strict followers of their faith. Why were they so bent on their religious propensity when they had the option to leave a modern secular life, with more freedom?

My take on these problems is two-fold: firstly, the modern Jewish American women attempt to reclaim their past in which they were deprived of religious participation. This argument is in tune with Susannah Heschel's point that Jewish feminists wanted to "create new rituals and to find halakhic

justifications for women to observe aspects of Judaism from which they were exempt" (46). It is an attempt to understand the religion by actively participating in it, at the same time logically analysing the reasons for gender-bias that operated for ages within it. Secondly, I argue that the third-generation Jewish women who were born around/after the women's liberation movement had encountered racism in multicultural America. This was also a time when the educated people of ethnic groups like African American were taking recourse to "roots" to trace their history and identity. The third-generation Jewish American women also encountered the questions of identity in multicultural America, given that they had experienced some forms of racism. To settle these simmering questions of their exclusion from their religion, their othering from the mainstream world, and their quest for identity, the only recourse was their "roots", Judaism. The next section examines the aesthetic representation of all these problems/concerns and subjectivity of Jewish characters through literary analysis.

### **Literary Representation: Rebecca Goldstein's *Mazel***

Goldstein's *Mazel* published in 1995 won the National Jewish Book Award for Fiction and the Edward Lewis Wallant Award. *Mazel* means luck in Yiddish, and Jewish people strongly believe in it—*Mazel* is a "great confounder of closed systems and their pretenders" (1) (all the quotes hence will be from the text). In the process of writing *Mazel*, Goldstein mentions in the "Afterword" of the novel, she felt intense Jewish experience, as Jewishness "snuck up" on her. This effect surprised her as it proceeded to apply on all that followed, just as it happens with one of her "very own character" (364). *Mazel* is about three women of three different generations—the grandmother, Sasha; her daughter, Chloe; and Phoebe, the granddaughter—who distinctly whittle their career and live in a markedly idiosyncratic manner. Sasha is an actress, who had her reputation in pre-war Poland in Yiddish theatre, later she migrates to New York. Chloe is a professor of Classical languages in Columbia, and Phoebe is a professor of mathematics at Princeton University. These three women are ideologically different from each other. For the sake of lucidity, the analysis of the novel is divided into two sections: Pre-American Life and Life in America.

### **Pre-American Life: Shtetl and Judaism**

Goldstein depicts the condition of Jewish people in Poland, around the 1930s, in poor limelight due to reasons like poverty and religious discrimination. Owing to these reasons, the Jewish people leave their homes and move elsewhere in search of a job and a better life. Sasha, whose actual name was Sorel, was born in Shilftchev, a shtetl or Jewish settlement in Poland keeps moving to different places to build her career, and in search of freedom from the confines of religious restriction. It was not just Sorel/Sasha who wandered to different places, but most of the Jewish men and women did the same. Her mother, Leiba, travelled

far and wide for commercial purposes with her husband. Her sister Fraydel thinks of going off with the “gypsies”. Her partner, Maurice, moves from Poland to Palestine and then to America, and from there he keeps moving without settling down anywhere. Even Sorel travels with the Bilbulnik Art Theatre to different places. Then she leaves Shluftchev for Warsaw, where she is given a new name, Sasha, by Aunt Frieda. From there, she moves to Vilna, conceives Chloe, and gives birth to her in Palestine. Finally, she travels to America and settles in Manhattan, New York.

Life had been difficult for the Jewish women, in Poland, within the confines of their religion. They were not allowed to express their mind, and speaking and singing openly were considered depravity. Leiba would not sing during day time “lest [she should] be heard by some male outside of the family, which is forbidden by modesty..... [and her] singing was one of the nighttime secrets that Sorel kept to herself” (10). Sorel could not participate in the theatre without being a rebel, as women were not supposed to involve themselves in activities that involved any form of public display. Her sister, Fraydel, was an excellent storyteller and a brilliant person. However, she became prey to the priest whom she loved and “me[t] in secrecy”, and he inflicted the “poison of self-hatred” in her (151). Helen Meyers writes, in Fraydel Goldstein “presents us with a portrait of a madwoman of the shtetl- a Jewish Judith Shakespeare figure who could find no outlet for her genius in the oppressively traditional shtetl” (62). Fraydel, finally, ends her life by committing suicide.

Problems were emanating from the social quarters for the Jewish people. They wanted to fit into the society, and to do so, they had to mask their identity, as it was their Jewish identity that caused them trouble. One of the identity markers that they compromised over was their Jewish names. They changed their names to be acceptable to the mainstream society, and to prove that they were modern, therefore, secular. In *Mazel* many characters change their names: Fruma and Chayim changing their names to Frieda and Heinrich, and names of their sons Velvel, Meyer and Leibel to Wolfgang, Maximilian and Ludwig respectively. Aunt Frieda provides Sorel with a new name, Sasha. Another instance of racial discrimination that the novel depicts is the covert banning of the first Yiddish play, *Serkele*, a “story of an ambitious woman.” It was not produced in the lifetime of its writer, Solomon Ettinger. Hence, “copies of the manuscript were privately circulated, daringly read in the salons and parlors of the Polish Jewish intelligentsia” (178). Thus, the discrimination was of race and gender as the lead character was a female Jew.

Compromising their religious belief fetched some relief to both Jewish wo/men in Poland, though this came at the cost of resentment of friends and relatives of similar faith. Hence, the Jewish wo/men were rattled in the quandary of private and public life as they tried to balance between these two, in the context of modernity and tradition. Aunt Frieda, in *Mazel*, is an example of this blend: She was “a modern, married woman who didn’t cover her hair. Though she had assured Sorel’s mother that her home was strictly kosher, [but Sorel’s father]

didn't touch any of the fancy pastries that Aunt Frieda laid out on the round table" (172). With these changes, in their lives, Frieda and Henrich, her husband, "instantly became people of the highest importance, mixing with the most elite of Jewish society" "in Poland, even in such city as Warsaw" (168). Hence, it required some compromise over their traditional Jewish faith to blend themselves in society. Such changes also brought about class hierarchy within the Jewish people, so in Warsaw, there was a particular class of "Jews who didn't look like Jews, who didn't think like Jews" (167).

Given all the difficulties and discrimination that the Jewish people encountered they moved to different parts of the world which permitted them, and America was one such haven. However, the question of home and homeland did not leave the Jewish people even in America as Helene Meyers deals with this topic in her discussion of *Mazel*.<sup>8</sup> Though the first-generation migrants to America would find a space for themselves to grow in many fronts, it is the later generations that come up with problems of different nature, like identity and racism. The major concern for the first-generation would be that of survival, and the generation that follows would have time and space to think about matters that form their subjectivity. In the next section, the essay takes up this changing scenario of Jewish women in America from one generation to the next.

### **Life in America: Jewish Women's Role in Judaism**

In *Mazel*, when the Jewish people move from shtetl to different places, they had a difficult time as they encountered unfamiliar settings—social, political and religious. For the Jewish women, facing modern pattern of livelihood posed a challenge as they were always trained in a traditional religious manner. However, for Sasha, it was relatively easy to embark on the model of modern livelihood given that she was ambitious and flexible to changes. She was "an irrepressible champion of chance and disorder" (16) and "*emphatically*, not the sort of person whose head is swivelled on backward, fixated on the past" (21, emphasis in original). She was quick in adapting to changing situation, showing-off her talents, and boasting about her daughter. Sasha neither followed religious rituals nor did she mingle with people who would make her realize of her religious duties.

On the other hand, her daughter, Chloe, was not as open-hearted and liberal like her mother, nor was she decisive about matters like her daughter, Phoebe. She represented a figure that was caught up in a mess between her own personal life and her societal responsibilities. She shared the same fate as her mother, as she was also a single-parent. She was educated, modern and individualistic like her mother. She knew that her daughter missed her father as she asked about him often. Chloe considered Judaism outside the realm of her experience, and "had no idea whether this was, in itself, a good thing", however, she thinks that it is good for her daughter (336).

Paradoxically, it was Phoebe who was not just religious, but a strict follower of Judaism, and "describe[d] herself as orthodox" (332). She decided to "start taking being Jewish so very seriously, insisting on removing it from the level of mythology" (336). She was a strong personality, and Sasha saw the trace of her sister in Phoebe: "Fraydel returned, given a second chance at life" (17). Phoebe was imaginative and brilliant, a challenge to existing patriarchy. Phoebe moved to Lipton, the place which Sasha senses as a modern version of Shlufchev, the shtetl, that did not provide an opportunity for Fraydel. However, given that Phoebe had similar brilliance like that of Fraydel, and she was in a setting that enabled the growth of her talent, there were chances that she would do something unique. Phoebe was exactly the character that Goldstein aimed for: "I'm interested in characters who are full of longing, who have that sense of displacement" (Lang 6).

The question about Phoebe that arises here is the kind of displacement that she suffered. This will also enable us to understand her interest in Orthodox Judaism from which her grandmother distanced herself. In the case of her mother, as a second-generation Jewish woman, she was still striving to balance between professional and personal life. As a single mother, she had responsibility within the domestic sphere, and as a University Professor, she had responsibility at the professional level. But more than that, as a second-generation Jewish American woman, she was amenable about her stance regarding her religion working in a secular and modern space of the University. Hence, she was indifferent to her religion and did not indulge in thinking about it.

In case of Phoebe, a modern Jewish American woman of third-generation, who had a prospective career as a mathematics professor, the case was different. She chose to follow her traditional religion, unlike Sasha and Chloe, and wanted to marry in an Orthodox Jewish manner. When Goldstein says that in *Mazel* the Jewishness "snuck up" her very character, she certainly implies Phoebe. In other words, Phoebe also resonates like Goldstein who says in the interview: "I'm a philosopher and a rationalist. I take grounding beliefs very seriously. I think that it's a very important human responsibility. We have to look for justification" (20). When Phoebe reclaims to Orthodox Judaism despite her modern education, there are many "justifications" that back up her stance.

Some of the justifications emanate from the fact that the modern academia that Phoebe was engaged in post women's movement discussed issues of cultural relevance like identity and subjectivity. It is not very unlikely to have an impact of such discussion in the interdisciplinary set-up. This was a historical moment for the ethnic groups in quest of their identity, like the African American were taking recourse to the "roots", i.e. Africa, to define themselves<sup>9</sup>. In case of Jewish people, the only roots that they could go back to for identity was their religion, i.e. Judaism. The other reason why Phoebe takes recourse to the Orthodox faith is also to reclaim the status within the religious faith from which they had been historically debarred. As an academician, Phoebe had the time to reflect on matters that concerned historical injustice, like racial and gender discrimination,

over the period of time how it had contributed to her subjectivity. It is similar to what Cynthia Ozick says, "I do very much see Judaism in its ontological and moral aspects as a civilization that continues to define how I am to understand my life" (qtd. in Kauvar, "Interview" 1985 379). In a similar strain, Phoebe sees no escape from Judaism in defining and understanding herself, thus, she embraces it.

## **Conclusion**

The condition of Jewish women from the time they arrived in America to the time they willfully participated in the functioning of Judaism is a trajectory marked with lots of ups and downs in their lives. These ups and downs are caused by continued developments that occur within the Jewish communities in America, at the same time, changes marked in multicultural American society. The changes that ensued owing to reforms within Judaism enhanced the position of Jewish women within the religious sphere, and that enhancement spread in the domestic and social spaces too. Jewish women started to feel free and pursue their dreams and acquired modern education. The religion which was looked upon with abhorrence for its restrictive nature was something to look upon for security. This backcloth of Jewish women's trajectory, from discarding Judaism to taking up the ownership, finds its depiction in Rebecca Goldstein's award-winning novel *Mazel*. Goldstein's heroine, the first-generation migrant Jewish woman Sasha is an epitome of rebellion, who navigates her way through the modern life of America in her terms and conditions. She is indifferent to her religion as the primary focus is on survival. Her daughter, Chloe, is a second-generation Jewish woman in America who is educated and teaches at Columbia University. She is a single mother and entrapped in the phase of transition of life, from survival to career. Thus, for her, religion is not of much consequence as she adjusts herself with the Jewish identity in the modern secular world. What was renounced by the previous generation is embraced by the third-generation—the modern and educated granddaughter of Sasha, Phoebe. She is not just religious but chooses to pursue Orthodox Judaism. As a professor of mathematics, she can rationalize matters to their advantage, and teaching in Princeton gives her avenues to indulge in reflection and discussion on cultural issues, like ideology and identity. It was also a historical time that educated people in ethnic groups were sprawling upon their roots to give meaning to their lives. Phoebe looks for this meaning-making process in her religion by understanding the historical exemption that Jewish women underwent, and subverting such historiography through her participation in Orthodox Judaism.

## **Notes :**

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<sup>1</sup> For details see, Irving Howe's *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life they Found and Made*. Touchstone, 1976.

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- <sup>2</sup> Alternate spellings are Toirah, Toyre, Torah. It literally means “Teaching”, and includes the five books of Moses. In general, it means Jewish law and value. See, *Jewish English Lexicon* <https://jel.jewish-language.org/words/579>
- <sup>3</sup> Orthodox Judaism upholds the point of view that the Torah is God-given, and it decides the course of life of the Jewish people. Conservative and Reform Judaism are more liberal. Conservative Judaism is slightly more traditional in its approach, but Reform Judaism is more secular in approach. It views Jewish laws as “a source from which individual Jews may draw ceremonies and other practices which they find meaningful.” For more information on the differences between the three types of Judaism, one can refer David Steinberg’s “Orthodox, Conservative and Reform Judaism”. The differences have been systematically arranged for more convenience of the readers in terms of Religion, Jewish Laws, Secularism and others.  
Source: [www.adath-shalom.ca/OR.htm](http://www.adath-shalom.ca/OR.htm)
- <sup>4</sup> Also, written as Halachah or Halakha. It means “a set of Jewish rules and practices which affects every aspect of life”. It comes from the Torah, the rabbis, and custom. See, *Judaism 101: Halakhah: Jewish Law* <https://www.jewfaq.org/halakhah.htm>
- <sup>5</sup> Alternate spellings are mitzvah, mitsve. It literally means “commandment” and good deed. See, *Jewish English Lexicon* <https://jel.jewish-language.org/words/386>
- <sup>6</sup> By “the New Israel” Alina Polyak means The Christian Church, which overtook the “birthright of the Chosen people.” See, *Tradition and Modernity in Contemporary Jewish American Literature*, VDM Verlag Dr. Müller Co., 2010.p. 18.
- <sup>7</sup> The racism meted out to the African American was that along the “color-line” to put in terms of W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Soul of Black Folks*.
- <sup>8</sup> For full article, see Helene Meyers’ “On Homelands and Home-making Rebecca Goldstein’s Mazel.” *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 33, No. 3, 2010, pp. 131-141  
Published by: Indiana University Press Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/jml.2010.33.3.131>
- <sup>9</sup> Many of the African American writers post-*Black Arts Movement* looked for “roots” for their identity. To mention some: Alex Haley, Sania Sanchez, Amiri Baraka, Toni Morrison, etc.

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## **BEING TO BECOMING: THE DISCOURSE OF SELF IN DORIS LESSING'S *THE GOLDEN NOTEBOOK* AND *LOVE, AGAIN***

**Sanghamitra Sadhu**

### **Abstract**

The article reads Lessing's fiction in a framework that underscores writing as a medium to confront the self, and performance as a locus of self-recuperations. It contends that narrative identities blur authorial distinctions and the collapse of self-other binary in the narrative problematizes the realm of fiction and reality, as much as it complicates the narrative self, that stands at the interstices of history, fiction, and ideology. The article explores the dynamics of self and its narrativization in Doris Lessing's fiction *The Golden Notebook* (1962) and *Love, Again* (1996) underlining that signifying the self in textual and visual medium is a complex project and crises in the self are accompanied by dispersion of language. While *The Golden Notebook* interrogates the problematic of self along with shifting conception of author; *Love, Again* explores the self that is put on performance with its ramifications of actors, narrator, author and spectators further implying the power of music, theatre and opera that can have affective bearing on the self. The paper argues that Lessing's fiction is marked by a tension while rendering the self in its linguistics resonances and immediateness.

**Keywords :** self, narrative, performance, language, identity

### **Introduction**

The discourse of the self and the question of narrative authority assume a crucial significance in the writings of Doris Lessing (1919-2013), the Nobel laureate African-British writer of the post-war generation. The engagement with the self and its ontological possibilities in a challenging cultural zone, that has withstood variegated socio-political upheavals like settler colonialism, racism, gender crisis and other forces operative in the Southern Africa, calls for an analysis of the self's complex negotiation with the other. The authorial self gives a vantage point to examine how identity as well as agency is constructed in European and Euro-African texts written by white African woman writers. In *The Essential Gesture* (1989), Nadine Gordimer raises the question "Where Do Whites Fit In?" (1959) and her question is directed towards the Euro-African authors who support or subvert the imperial claim to the continent or manifest

an uneasy ambivalence complicit in the project of colonialism. Lessing articulates the difficulties of writing as a white person belonging to Africa. Claiming an African identity, Lessing, even though her experiences are personal, underlines the conflicting nature of articulating a story in a specific Rhodesian setting. Like Gordimer, who has experienced the apartheid, Lessing too, is a witness to the political turmoil of segregated Rhodesia. The construction of a narrative identity in a postcolonial set up is challenged in its plural antecedents and practices of race related mythologies in that questions such as who speaks for whom become problematic. The white African writers always carry the burden of what J.M. Coetzee calls 'complicit colonialism'. Their voices of representation are always held suspect and the writer is always on the horns of dilemma regarding her writing position and hence attempts to establish the individual narrative self which is not constrained by the collective. In her writing, Lessing endeavours to establish an independent speaking/writing self that is not subject to the mandates of colonialism, racism, and patriarchy.

Writing about the self – its transition from being to becoming in the ambit of narrative is a constant theme that Lessing engages in her fictional and non-fictional works. It veers around her early fictional works like *The Summer Before the Dark* (1973), the novel sequence *Children of Violence* (1952-69) and *The Golden Notebook* (1962), and late works like *Canopus in Argos: Archives* series (1983-90), *Love, Again* (1996), and other non-fictional works including her autobiography. Claire Sprague (1990) traces Lessing's depiction of a fractured and fragmented self in *The Golden Notebook*, a layered self in *The Four Gated City*, and a less central view of the self in the *Canopus* series. In *Martha Quest* Lessing develops the notion of the dialogic self through the portrayal of Martha that is transpersonal. In her works, Lessing's concern has been to explore the possibility of delineating the fully realized notion of the self in writing. Writing that enables one to evolve into being is clearly reflected in *The Golden Notebook* – a work that examines the location of a writer in the post war situation and the crisis of writing in Britain in the 1950s and the 1960s. Located in the interstices of modernism and postmodernism the novel addresses the shifting contours of the notion of author through the character of Anna Wulf. The theme of mental breakdown which Lessing claims in *The Golden Notebook* as central to the novel is built around a series of notebooks written by Anna. Anna's notebooks are a means of writing the self to overcome her self-disintegration. She simultaneously keeps four coloured notebooks – black, red, yellow, and blue and divides her self into four parts ascribing each notebook a distinct theme. *The Golden Notebook* with its unique formal and structural complexity incorporates five sections: each section is introduced by an episode entitled "Free Women" which finally makes up the short conventional novel *Free Women*. Each section of *Free Women* is further followed by episodes from each of four differently coloured notebooks. Finally, there is 'The Golden Notebook', the penultimate section of the novel *The Golden Notebook*. The various coloured notebooks include a diary, the partial and disrupted manuscript of a novel, a 'historical' and 'factual' record of events related to the Communist Party in London in the 1950s and the manuscript of the

biographical details of the central character Anna's life in Rhodesia. The novel further interrogates larger questions of truth, fact, point of view, realism, objectivity and so on, making the terrain of fiction and reality ever problematic.

In consonance with the poststructuralist ideas of author and subjectivity, *The Golden Notebook* brings to the fore how freedom for the writing subject emerges through the intermittent effacement of the self. The 'Free Women' sections in the novel ostensibly evoke the notion of freedom but freedom here signifies a chaos or 'cracking up' that accompanies the breakdown of social convention and disintegration of the individual. In the opening paragraphs of the novel Anna says to Molly, "the point is, that as far as I can see, everything is cracking up" (25). Anna seems to understand her world and her experience of the world as fragmenting and fragmented, where 'unity' remains an illusory fiction. Any work of art including the novel captures fragmentation as Anna maintains, "the novel has become a function of the fragmented society, the fragmented consciousness" (75). Anna's notion of the fragmented self confirms the poststructuralists' notion of subjectivity positing "a centreless dispersed subject who is literally a composite of various socially and culturally constructed roles or positions – not perspectives – that cannot be reconciled" (40). Hence, the narrative self veering around different subject positions can attain freedom without being constrained by any dominant ideology. In the preface to *The Golden Notebook*, Lessing concedes how an 'author' writing without being subjective could earn a greater sense of freedom. In section I of *Free Women* the narrator reiterates the effacement of Anna both within and outside the narrative. Anna, the writer "deliberately effaced herself and played to the dramatic Molly" (30), when the two would go out together. There are other occasions when Anna or her alter ego Ella is being effaced in the narrative. Throughout her notebooks and the 'Free Women' sections she appears faceless on the page. She undergoes 'defacement', to use Paul de Man's term in that she obliterates her subjectivity. Roberta Rubenstein points out to the "dialectic between Anna's projections and self-cancellations" which is formerly expressed through the self-canceling fictions that comprise the "layerings of the narrative" (102-103). With each notebook replacing another, the self undergoes erasure and selects an alternative. With each notebook that interconnects to and replaces another, the narrative self undergoes erasure and selects alternative representation. As Anna begins to record her literary experience in the Black Notebook, she confronts textual resistance, "I am incapable of writing the only kind of novel which interests me: a book powered with an intellectual or moral passion strong enough to create order, to create a new way of looking at life. It is because I am too diffused" (76). Throughout the narrative, Anna is in search of a writing that can capture her own self. Each notebook eludes truth that it claims to unravel. The provisional nature of writing in the notebooks allows Anna's subjectivity 'to be in process', to use Julia Kristeva's term, a subject which is not fixed but constructed, improvised and negotiated through reading and writing and therefore it is "constantly called into question"(129). At the beginning of the Blue Notebook Anna realizes that her

writing undergoes displacement, and like Derrida's 'scene of writing' her writing meets resistance to be transformed into signified systems.

I came upstairs from the scene between Tommy and Molly and instantly began to turn it into a story. It struck me that my doing this – turning everything into fiction – must be an evasion... Why do I never write down, simply, what happens...? Obviously my changing everything into fiction is simply a means of concealing something from myself (325).

Correspondingly, *transition* in the narrative whether at the thematic or structural level also hints at the provisionality of the narrative as well as the truths of life. The narrative transition in the novel also hints at a partial closure since one notebook is exclusive of the themes explored in other notebooks. However, one narrative closure creates another narrative opening and a new narrative identity of the self. Hence the effacement of the narrative self and closure of the narrative are closely connected. The juxtaposed sections from the notebooks interpolated with sections from *Free Women* and the multiplicity of the narrative self create a rambling narrative. Writing is conflated with Anna Wulf's existence; indeed her existence is predicated to the fact that she is writing. With words losing their meaning and the narrative getting fragmented, Anna pronounces many times in the novel that she would write no more – "I shall never write another" (214) but eventually falls prey to her narrative compulsion. The theorists of *écriture féminine* insist on the textual practice of writing the female body that subverts the coherence of language as a signifying system and assigns it with "a notion of feminine as subversion, a transgressive force linked with the realm of the mother's body that continually threatens to disrupt the single fixed meanings of an authoritative and repressive phallocentric discourse" (Felski 23). Anna does write her body in the Blue Notebook, recording her physical symptoms of illness, her experiments with sex and pleasure, and even the details of her menstruation. Such a practice may lead the feminist critics to locate her in the domain of *écriture féminine*. But the paradox is that Anna writes her body "without a body, dumb, blind" and articulates the impossibility of inscribing the body – its truthful depiction in art. What becomes noticeable in Anna's case is the constant inscription and erasure of herself. As she mentions: "I am always having, as it were, to cancel myself out" (283). Self-effacement recurs in *The Golden Notebook*, and it becomes apparent that the Annas of the text engage in repeated self cancellation through writing. Nevertheless, the narrative self is not annihilated with each self erasure, rather it ensures its free movement within the constraints of the discourse. Anna as a writer struggles to distance herself from her subjective perception and develop an impersonal aesthetic that nevertheless emerges out of her personal and specific emotional experiences. Anna's experiment with writing reinstates that the locus of writing no longer lies within a sovereign, unified subject but it emerges out of a split in the subject where its different facets enter into a conflictual discourse. Helene Cixous theorizes that the splitting within the subject is germane in the postmodern discourse of the subject and its enunciation. The writing subject or the narrative

self is never the coherent "I". Cixous formulates in *Stigmata* that writing consists of "inscribing the abyss we are" (42).

The displacement of the narrative self caused by its split goes beyond the present time and incorporates the past. Thus, the present tense in Anna's commentary repeatedly resists the "I" in a uniform way and the text's representation of 'male' subjectivities offer a critique of the unified subjectivity and further substantiates the problematic of the narrative identity of the self. When Anna rejects Saul Green's "I" in *The Golden Notebook*, she reacts against not only his "I" but also her own "I", which she believes, compromises her art. According to Anna's logic, the artist needs to erase her "I" from the text, as it may prove detrimental to art.

The writer's 'strategy' of self-effacement further leads to the notion that the text is the zone where the author can manipulate the meaning of the text and limit access to veracity. The narrative matrix produces a simulacrum of itself; disguises its recounting and effaces the act of writing. In this context, it is pertinent to refer to the Canadian writer Aritha Van Herk, for whom the 'writing place' is the 'hiding place' (21). Writing is both a record of compulsions and of resistances to write. The textual zone which is ostensibly a site of revealing the truth may function to obliterate the same. Anna's writing fails to capture the truth about herself. Similarly, Janna, the protagonist in *The Diaries of Jane Somers* (1984), who claims writing as her 'trade' and obsessively notes down whenever any thought comes to her lest it does not 'fly away', discovers at the end that her novels are not a way of confronting the truth but of evading it. For Janna it is too heavy a weight to be transformed into language. The medium of language or more specifically writing is the field where the self reveals as well as hides itself in a dual process. However, this duality foregrounds the lack of control in the act of writing. The writer becomes a 'scribe' (in Cixous' term) who writes down and records what surges up in her interior so that one does not write a text but it writes itself. Cixous' conviction of a text that emerges by 'creating itself' is shared by Anna Wulf in *The Golden Notebook*. When Ella decides to write again, she searches for the text within her and which like an 'interior scroll' will gradually unfold and surface on the body of writing. In the Yellow notebook Ella meditates on a situation in which she might abandon her vocation, i.e. writing but it will not have much impact on her, as writing for Ella is less an act of creation than it is about recording the story already written in 'invisible ink'. As Ella ponders, "...because of the act of writing it was irrelevant – it was not an act of creation, but an act of recording something. The story was already written, in invisible ink ... well perhaps somewhere inside me is another story written in invisible ink ..." (283). Foregrounding the writerly selves of Anna/Ella in their desperate attempts of self narration the text creates an illusion of rendering the truth, or what Ronald Sukenick calls "the truth of the page" (25). Performing the narrative through the entries of diary and journal creates the reality of the writing situation. *The Golden Notebook* creates an immediacy of writing process by

recurrently invoking the act of writing through the border line of fictionality implying that the product of writing is more ‘real’ than the act of writing itself.

The narrative and structural complexity along with problematic theme of self-representation pervades Lessing’s *Love, Again* with a new dimension of the self. The schema of the narrative is much like *The Golden Notebook*: the novel’s protagonist Sarah Durham, a sixty-year-old professional writer-producer shares affinity with Anna Wulf of *The Golden Notebook*. Like Anna, Sarah’s vocation as a writer has been foregrounded in the novel, as she scripts plays for The Green Bird, a small London theatre group. She chooses to base her play on the romantic life and death of Julie Vairon, a historical figure of the French *fin-de-siecle*, who suffers failure in love and ultimately ends her life. Julie’s journals, her self-portraits, and music combined with Sarah’s rereading of those journals form the basis of her play. Julie’s compulsive nature to signify herself through narrative and visual modes overshadow the narrative: “She chose to live alone, paint and draw and compose her music and, every night of her life, write a commentary on it” (33). The narrative confirms a certain teleology of Julie’s drawing of self-portraits; she draws herself portraits compulsively in water colours, pastels, charcoal, and pencil not because she lacks a model, but she finds it as a means to discover ‘her real hidden nature’. Writing the self through the journal entries and through self portraits enables her to eschew the phases of her life she hardly liked, and grant certain power and freedom to her. Like Anna’s attempt to compartmentalize her writing by drawing a black line in between the notebooks, Julie’s rendition of different sketches of her life is also separately marked by a black line. The identity of the narrative self encompasses a double vision of the self – as narrator and the narrated. The representation of the self in the self portraits and the journals adumbrates this double vision. In *Politics of Postmodernism* (2002) Linda Hutcheon points out the fissure between the self-image and the imaged self, between the represented and the representing self. The gap between the ‘true’ self and the projected self is pronounced by Anna Wulf: “When I read my notebooks I didn’t recognize myself. Something strange happens when one writes about oneself” (499). The problem becomes turgid when the written text has to negotiate with a different medium such as a film. In one episode in *The Golden Notebook*, Anna envisions the film versions of her book projecting Michael and Anna; Ella and Julia; Anna and Molly. But she feels the presence of the jeering projectionist (who runs the films of her past) laughing at the credit ‘Directed by Anna Wulf’ and mocking her with: “And what makes you think that the emphasis you have put on it is correct?” (537). In the course of Lessing’s narrative, Sarah frequently examines her ‘double’ – her reflection in the mirror and explores the different dimensions of her being. The fissure in the subjectivity as revealed in Julie’s journals, self portraits and music is amenable to the postmodern aesthetics of self representation: “It is hard, listening to her late music, to match with what she said of herself in her journal, and with her self-portraits” (27). At several points Sarah finds that Julie’s journals and self-portraits do not tally, the journals never mention of her dancing that is so conspicuous in her self-portraits. The construction of Julie’s subjectivity in her

self-portraits ranging from an angel to an Arab girl with ‘a transparent veil’ indicates the plurality of subjectivity implicit in the postmodern self-representation. Apart from the self-portraits there is also a mention about the photographs of ‘real’ Julie. Barthes’ autobiography *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975) deploys both photographic and narrative representation, reminding that self-representation remains, in all modes, a contentious issue. The text announces in its epigraph that “all of this must be thought of as being said by a character in a novel”. Here the narrative self assumes the positions of narrator and character. This evasive technique is exemplified in Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse* (1977) where sexual orientation of the protagonist is kept in dark by the narrative’s use of grammar from the original French. Various self-revealing modes create less an opportunity to reveal the self than to hide it, further reaffirming that signifying the self whether in narrative or visual medium remains a complex issue.

The discourse of self and its narrativization is more complicated in *Love, Again*. The novel narrates Julie’s attempt to inscribe herself in her self-portraits, journals, and extracted passages from the latter. Side by side, we have Sarah’s journal that keeps record of what happens in rehearsals and performances and her emotional upheavals toward the men in her life. The play ostensibly draws its source from Julie’s journals, her self-portraits and music but is modified/rewritten by the ‘co-authors’: Stephen and Sarah. All these heterogeneous writerly selves combined with both direct and indirect narration surge up in the novel, further indicating the problematic and complexity of a ‘unified’ narrative self. Like the final *Golden Notebook* which is co-produced by Anna and Saul, the script for Julie Vairon is co-authored by both Stephen and Sarah. Both these fiction problematize the self along with the issues of authority and subjectivity, questioning the very notion of a single and unified authorship.

At one level, *Love, Again* revisits *The Golden Notebook*, but what is more important in the text is the self that is put on ‘real’ performance with its ramifications of actors, narrator/author and the spectators. The complexity of the narrative self is interpreted by Flanagan as the ‘multiplex self’ which has the power to capture the centrifugal forces of heterogeneous strands of life. In the essay “When Narrative Fails” (2004), J. Melvin Woody points out the power of drama, theatre, music, dance, and other spatial forms that can cope with the diversity of the ‘multiplex self’, especially when the narrative fails. Theatre orients the self to society by forming interactions with other selves, thereby establishing a dialogic relation between the actors and spectators. The fusion between the self and the world that the theatre incites enables the viewing self into ‘becoming’, to use Deleuze and Guattari’s term. The ‘becoming’ of a self, according to Deleuze and Guattari, enables the viewing self to undergo transformation in the process.

In *Love, Again* evocation of theatre in both literal and metaphorical levels further problematizes the correlation between narrative and theatre and the function of the narrative self in the matrix of theatre. The narrative evokes the idea of theatrical illusion, ‘theatrum mundi’, that life is just a spectacle. Even the

characters in the novel blur the boundary between living and playing roles (echoing the writerly selves of Anna and Julie who erode the boundary between writing and living); they speak as if they were playing a role each moment of their lives. References to life as a stage overshadows the narrative, especially in Sarah's comment that "there are times when everything seems like a film set or a stage set..." (58). The characters carry the baggage of allusions used in the specific dramatic convention. One of the characters is described as "rakish – it would have done well in Restoration comedy" (67); they seem to be living in a self contained world, completely isolated and apart from the quotidian life, where nothing but the role playing matters: "Perhaps the pleasure of any new company of people, particularly in the theatre, is simply this, that the families... are somewhere else, are in another life" (89). The interrelation between life and theatre in the novel is provided by Sarah, when she is considering the emotional loss and gain of being involved in show business: "The theatre, in short, was just like life..., always whirling people and events into improbable associations and then – that's it" (191). Such dialectic of theatre and life is best manifested in Charlotte Salomon's *Life? Or Theatre?* – a brief autobiographical account of the writer that incorporates nearly eight hundred paintings with the subtitle, "a tri-coloured play with music" (43). Thematically, Charlotte's text replicates Julie's journals and self-portraits on the premise that one's life is analogous to the other in that they haunt their works and the mind of the characters even after their death. Charlotte's and Julie's attempts to enact their lives through various artistic means raise questions about life, death and art carrying the implication that "performance and theatre are instances of enactments predicated on their own disappearance" (Phelan 2).

The modern theory of narrative relies on the belief that theatre is not just a convention outside the narrative, but theatricality is coded within the narrative. The notions of point of view, scene, perspective, and focalization refer not to the pictoriality of a text but to the theatricalized aspects of the text. In *S/Z* (1970) Barthes espouses that the representational codes are employed in a space whose model can no longer be the painting (the tableau) but is instead the theatre (the scene). Further, he obliquely refers to the scenic metaphors of textuality and writing pertaining to modern literary theory. The theatrical apparatus frames the elements of a text, disrupting traditional narrative codes and facilitates fragmentation, narrative discontinuity, and the negation of any teleology. The polyphonic textual effect of writing as well as language is manifested in the theatre by the scenic metaphors. The self reflexivity of a text or *mise-en-abyme* inherent in modern writing points to the ways in which foregrounding or 'staging' takes place in a text. The equation between theatre and writing is further reaffirmed by Derrida in "The Scene of Writing". He emphasizes that Freud's notion of the *Darstellung* of the psyche signifies not only representation but also 'visual figuration' as well as 'theatrical representation'. For Barthes theatre is a 'density of signs', and it encompasses a wide space where all the divergent paths of writing cross. In *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, Barthes does not delimit the scope of the theatre; rather he promulgates its immense possibilities:

At the crossroads of the entire oeuvre, perhaps the Theatre: there is not a single one of his texts, in fact which fails to deal with a certain theatre, and spectacle is the universal category in whose aspect the world is seen. The theatre relates to all the apparently special themes which pass and return in what he writes: connotation, hysteria, fiction, the image repertoire (imaginaire), the scene, grace, the orient, violence, ideology...(177).

Theatre, for Barthes, is the unifying figure of writing that can contain diverse fields of study such as linguistics, cultural criticism, psychoanalysis, narratology, and so on. The semiology of the theatre dovetails with the theory of writing and justifies the novel's inclusion of theatricality within it. However, it is important to analyze the connection of narrative self with the theatre within the parameters of a narrative.

Just as writing or textualization is the medium to confront the self, theatre also functions as a locus through which the self can recuperate and transform itself. The theatrical setting and its impact on the lives of the participants further exemplify psychological encoding underlying the narrative. By using the metaphor of theater, Lessing attempts to capture the indelible imprints left on the psyche of the characters. Lessing purposefully situates her ageing protagonist Sarah in the opera that works as a catalyst to heighten her emotional and long buried erotic feelings. Her emotional deprivation as a child has deeply affected her sense of the self, which has made her emotionally dependent on others. The narrative takes a detour in examining Sarah's emotional life and retrospectively discovering the cause of her emotional wound. Sarah moving back and forth and in mining her childhood experiences develops a strong sense of loss: "Perhaps, the paradise we dream of when in love is the one we were ejected from, where all embraces are innocent" (181). Sarah's descent into the vortex, during which she confronts her long-forgotten emotional experiences echoes *The Golden Notebook*, which records Anna's fragmentations of self.

It is the power of collective theatrical experience that enables Sarah to come to terms with her own sense of self and devise ways to recuperate it. It is Julie's journals and songs that appeal Sarah to form an affinity with the Martinique lady and subsequently she (Sarah) begins translating Julie's writings from the original French. Sarah feels oneness with Julie's life and it is an opportunity for her to relive her own life: "Julie is that side of myself that was never allowed to live. The Jungians have a word for it. My *anima*" (62). Sarah was captivated by Julie's life and worked becoming "part of Julie Vairon, day and night, indefinitely" (82). Beguiled by Julie, Stephen, the co-author of Sarah's script, feels that both he and Julie are "made for each other" (48). The composite script of Sarah and Stephen brings together an international cast of performers over different locations such as France, a country estate in Oxfordshire and finally, London. The rehearsals performed in different locations create a bond among the company members – English, French, American and they are all united by Julie and do not want to part with. The play's performance has its supreme effect on Sarah, the theatre-manager and the director who becomes

engrossed in the performance of a scene that is close to her own life. In the course of rehearsals, Sarah herself sings for the cast her version of a song that accompanies the scene of Julie's desertion by her last lover Remy. The enactment of Julie's life has such an overwhelming impact on Sarah that she becomes almost a spectator to her own life. Sarah's case can be interpreted in terms of psychoanalysis. Rubenstein points out that the narrative's employment of theatrical metaphor on the wider stage of the city of London enables us to apply D. W Winnicott's theory of psychoanalysis. In her essay "All the World's a Stage": Theatricality, Spectacle and the Flaneuse in Doris Lessing's Vision of London" (2005), Rosario Arias views London as a potential space that renders creativity to the female flaneurs. Sarah as a *flaneuse* or spectator strolls around London; particularly Regent's Park, watches others and becomes a spectator to the real life scenes. The city of London becomes a greater theatrical stage for Sarah in which she observes the sketches of real lives and develops affinity with them. The scene of the mother with her son and daughter in flashback kindles Sarah's childhood memory while watching the scene she recognizes herself and creates a bond of sympathy with the child. In *Playing and Reality* (1971) Winnicott advocates a transitional space in which a moment of recognition is established between the mother and the child. Applying Winnicott's psychoanalytic ideas to the episode in Lessing's text we can say that a moment of recognition is established between Sarah's subjective world and the objective world of perception. Sarah's engagement as a spectator to real sketches of life as well as the performances in the theatre finds a creative relationship between the subjective and the objective world, finally, enabling her to re-experience life on those terms. So it is the subjective engagement with the outside world that enables her to relive her life and undergo a psychological healing of her wounded self. In her wanderings through the alleys of London and the theatrical performances on stage, Sarah tries to find an affinity with others. Diana Fuss, the poststructuralist theorist, stresses on the need of identifying with the others. In *Identification Papers* (1995), Fuss focuses on the process of identifying with other individuals and groups and argues that identification is the 'detour' that 'defines a self'.

*The Golden Notebook* and *Love, Again* take recourse to the power of music and opera at the moments of self crisis of their protagonists. In the final section of the Golden Notebook, Anna seems to rely on the power of music when words fail to make sense of the world and subsequently she suffers mental breakdown: "she tried various passages of music, some jazz, some bits of Bach, and some Stravinsky, thinking that perhaps music might say what words could not..." (565). In Sarah's case theatre works as a catalyst that brings out her long buried emotional grief, and its collective experience leads to the healing of herself.

In *The Golden Notebook* and *Love, Again*, Lessing puts more emphasis on mutation that the self undergoes in the process of creating an art form. It goes without saying that transformation of the self in the enclave of narrative is always followed by a positive value. Whether it is the medium of writing or theatre, the narrative self constantly endeavours to transform itself into an aesthetic product.

Such an effort is clearly delineated in Lessing's fiction that almost obliterates the demarcation between art and life. In his *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (1985), Alexander Nehamas propounds a willful shaping of one's life into an aesthetic product that endows it with meaning and importance. Nehamas maintains that, "the self, according to Nietzsche is not a constant, stable entity. On the contrary, it is something one becomes, something, he would even say, one constructs..." (7). Lessing precisely captures the Nietzschean notion of the evolving self, situating it in-between fiction and reality in the diverse manifestations, while examining its contradictions in a work of art.

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## AFGHANISTAN IN POST-9/11 AMERICAN POETRY: A CREATIVE RESPONSE TO *ORIENTALISM*

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### Abstract

This article seeks to read three post-9/11 American poems on Afghanistan – “The Weavers” and “Burka Women” by Gerald Wheeler, and “Kabul 2002 (From Dislocations)” by Dr. Bronwyn Winter – both as part of American Orientalism and as a significant intellectual departure from the standpoint alleged to be held by its previous form. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said alleges that American Orientalism is devoid of literature, politically motivated and has a stereotypical view of Islam, internalizing many aspects of its European counterpart. The very fact that the poems under discussion are a part of American Orientalism but characterized by a different perspective and written in a socio-political situation when certain other post-9/11 American poems confront the issue of Orientalism, potently makes the point that these poems can be taken as an implicit creative response to Orientalism. In this way, the three poems, all of which appeared in *An Eye for an Eye Makes the Whole World Blind: Poets on 9/11* (2002), a major anthology of 9/11 poetry published in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and edited by Allen Cohen and Clive Matson, constitute a landmark in the field of American Orientalism.

**Keywords :** American Orientalism, inter-textual reading, empirical verifiability, binary opposition,

Imprisoned behind adobe ruins,  
their fingers scarred & swollen  
from shelling nuts & beatings  
by religious police for sneaking  
daughters to secret reading lessons (113)

This is the way Gerald Wheeler introduces us to the plight of Afghan women under the Taliban regime in the post-9/11 poem, “Burka women.” This depiction immediately raises a set of important Saidian questions and thus reminds us of the axiom that no literary representation of the oriental world by a Westerner in the present time can avoid the interpretation of Orientalism by Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. The set of questions are as follows: Does the speaker

of the poem construct any stereotype about the Orient? Is his/her representation true to life? Is the speaker's apparent humanism genuine or a veiled form of imperial concern?

This inseparable connection between any contemporary, Western, literary representation of the oriental world and Said's text figures quite interestingly in certain, remarkable post-9/11 poems. The phrase 'post-9/11 poetry' usually refers to the body of poems that came into being in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. These attacks, which make a deep impact on American culture, society and life, are certainly a factor for implicitly raising among some American poets the issue of Orientalism in their post-9/11 poems.<sup>1</sup> As Laurence Goldstein asserts in "The Response of American Poets to 9/11: A Provisional Report":

They (the poets of *September 11, 2001: American Writers Respond*, an anthology of 9/11-poems, essays and memoirs) wrestle with an intractable dilemma: they wish to condemn the attacks while avoiding the kind of Orientalism that gathers all Muslims, or Arabs, into a monolithic category: The Enemy. (n.pag)

Richard Gray also suggests this dilemma and the issue of Orientalism that it entails when he interprets "The Pilots", a reflective post-9/11 poem, in "Imagining the Crisis in Drama and Poetry" and comments that this

...poem walks a delicate tightrope between acknowledging the humanity of those (the terrorists) it considers – the humanity they (the terrorists) shared, after all, with their victims and with us, the readers – and insisting on the inhumanity of their actions, the degree to which an acknowledgement of shared humanity was wiped out, obliterated in their minds by their dedication "to the cause" (175).

This implicit issue of Orientalism in post-9/11 American poetry is, definitely, a part of American Orientalism, and results both from the fact that the 9/11 terrorists were Arabic in racial origin and from Edward Said's critique of Orientalism in *Orientalism* as implied in Goldstein's stance on this issue.<sup>2</sup> However, though this issue has been pointed out in scholarship on post-9/11 poetry, it has not been explored yet, especially in connection with Said's text.

In this article three post-9/11 American poems on Afghanistan are read at once as a part of American Orientalism and as a significant intellectual departure from the previous standpoint which, according to Said in *Orientalism*, was held by American Orientalism. The aim is to make the point that such shift in attitude, located in a broader poetic context in which certain other post-9/11 poems ("The Pilots" and Heyen-anthology poems) arguably influenced by Said's text also evince the same kind of attitude, suggests a creative response to the theoretical claims regarding American Orientalism, made by Said in his polemic. The poems are as follows: "The Weavers" and "Burka Women" by Gerald Wheeler, and "Kabul 2002 (From Dislocations)" by Dr. Bronwyn Winter.

These poems are specifically chosen instead of the ones addressed by Goldstein and Gray because they offer us a greater scope of examination of the

implicit issue of Orientalism in post-9/11 poetry by an extensive focus on a part of the so-called Orient, that is, Afghanistan. Such focus is missing from "The Pilots" and the anthology-poems edited by Heyen, although these poems are also a part of American Orientalism and mark a departure from its previous form, as could be deduced from Goldstein's comment and Said's stance on American Orientalism. The three poems occur in one of the earliest and major anthologies of 9/11-poetry, *An Eye for An Eye Makes the Whole World Blind: Poets on 9/11* (2002), edited by Allen Cohen and Clive Matson, which came into being in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, a period characterized by an increased level of poetry reading and poetry writing.<sup>3</sup> The three poems also represent an interesting perspectival departure from most of the other poems (in the same anthology) that, basically, assume a complicity of American foreign policy in the terrorist event of 9/11 and condemn, as the title of the anthology suggests, any American act of vengeance in the form of war. In the words of Allen Cohen, this collection of poems is meant "to establish a different historical record of these monumental events (the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and its aftermath: the war on Islamic terrorism and Afghanistan, the anthrax problem, the abolition of certain American constitutional rights and so on)" (i), that challenges "the combination of propaganda and spin coming through the corporate controlled media, presidency, and congress"(i). In contrast to this standpoint of Cohen, the poems chosen implicitly support the war in Afghanistan by representing the obnoxious activities of the Taliban terrorists and the extremely pathetic condition of Afghan women and children under the brutal Taliban regime. This point of view partially reminds us of such recent theoretical works as *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007) by Jasbir K. Puar and *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (2005) by Inderpal Grewal, which consider the concern of the American government for Afghan women as cynical and as one of its guises to invade Afghanistan, besides claiming that the American military involvement did nothing to help improve the condition of Afghan women in a nation further destabilized by Western military intervention and occupation. The validity of such viewpoint is examined later in this article in the context of exploring the moral validity of the American invasion of Afghanistan.

On the other hand, most of today's scholars view Said's *Orientalism* "more as an icon than a methodological breakthrough;" which "can be shelved alongside the *Communist Manifesto* as a book that made a difference and now graces a canon" (Varisco xvii).<sup>4</sup> There are also some scholars who still value "Said's expose of Orientalist writing as a necessary speaking of truth to power" (Varisco xvii). In other words, they appreciate his claim to Western discursive complicity in imperial domination.<sup>5</sup> In the present time the style and the content of *Orientalism* are not so much a source of problem as its baneful impact on a wide variety of critical analysis. This idea is reflected in Alexander Joffe's regret that Said's work is "a stifling orthodoxy" (78), which has affected several fields of knowledge.

However, in keeping with the purpose of this article, I would like to note here that while critiquing American Orientalism, Said focuses exclusively on the Islamic Middle East. So, the question naturally arises at this point as to the applicability of his ideas to the case of Afghanistan. But, then, it is worthwhile to note that, though Afghanistan is, geographically, not a part of the Middle East, it is basically Islamic in its social, cultural and religious identity, and that the Middle East as a geographical entity hardly matters to Said in *Orientalism*.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, if Said can criticize American Orientalist attitude to the Middle East, he should have also done the same to Afghanistan, had American Orientalism and foreign policy engaged themselves so much in that country up to the time of his writing the thesis on Orientalism. It is necessary now to specify those aspects of American Orientalism that Said criticized in his seminal work and are relevant to my innovative, inter-textual reading.

Firstly, in the section “The Latest Phase” of *Orientalism*, Said clearly points out that an important feature of American Orientalism, unlike its European counterpart, is “its singular avoidance of literature” (291). Specialists in this field of knowledge are much more interested in “‘facts’ of which a literary text is perhaps a disturber” (291). This absence, according to him, has resulted in the continued reduction of the Arab or the Islamic Orient into a set of “statistics”, or in making it “dehumanized” (291). Said seeks to reinforce his point by claiming that a literary text, whether it is Arab or English or French, can bring us into direct contact with “a living reality” through “the power and vitality of words that, to mix in Flaubert’s metaphor from *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*, ... make them (the Orientalists) drop those great paralytic children – which are their ideas of the Orient – that attempt to pass for the Orient” (291).

Secondly, by referring to the speech of John Pickering, the President of American Oriental Society, at its first annual meeting in 1843, and to “a cultural relations policy” meant for “much better American understanding of the forces which are contending with the American idea for acceptance by the Near East” (qtd. in Said 295), Said asserts that American Orientalist researches are chiefly an outcome of the post-war (World War II) imperial concern of America, committed to the maintenance of the country’s imperial strategy and security, and therefore political in their conceptual framework. He adds that Middle East Institute served as a model for such concern, and organizations like Middle East Institute laid the foundation for “...the Middle East Studies Association, the powerful support of the Ford and other foundations, the various federal programs of support to universities, the various federal research projects” and so on (295).

Thirdly, Said resents the American Orientalist attitude to Islam, which characterizes this religion as a single entity incapable of making progress, and antithetical to any liberal civilization. As an illustration of his standpoint he describes the viewpoint of Gustave von Grunebaum who “has no difficulty presuming that Islam is a unitary phenomenon, unlike any other religion or civilization, and . . . antihuman, incapable of development, self-knowledge, or objectivity, as well as uncreative, unscientific, and authoritarian” (296). This

“unitary” view of Islam, Said claims immediately after describing Abdullah Laroui’s analysis of von Grunebaum, is retaliatory and has given rise to a discursive binary, “an invidiously ideological portrait between “us” and “them”” (299), symptomatic of a cultural hostility towards Islam.

Moreover, according to Said, American Orientalism is characterized by the principal dogmas of “old Orientalism” (300), or its European counterpart. These dogmas make “the absolute and systematic difference between the West, which is rational, developed, humane, superior, and the Orient, which is aberrant, undeveloped, inferior” (300). Another aspect of the dogmas, which is quite relevant to the intertextual reading in this article and is I think based on the foregoing aspect, is the idea that “the Orient is at bottom something either to be feared (the Yellow Peril, the Mongol hordes, the brown dominions) or to be controlled (by pacification, research and development, outright occupation whenever possible)” (301).

Interestingly, the very fact that the three American poems chosen for this discussion concentrate on Afghanistan and are, thus, a part of American Orientalism, now frees this type of Orientalism of the first charge, brought by Said, that it completely lacks literary output, although Said was right when he posited his thesis on Orientalism. In the journalistic mode of representation, the three poems deal with three successive stages of Afghanistan – “The Weavers” with the so-called “War on Terror” between the Taliban and the American forces, “Kabul 2002 (From Dislocations)” with the country under reconstruction after the war, and “Burka Women” with an intermediate stage between the two ones represented by the two other poems -- evoking “a living reality”, to borrow Said’s own words.<sup>7</sup> “The Weavers” is a potent representation of Afghan refugee children who embroider “stars, birds, sun / crescent moons, / & harvest’s bounty -”, on woolen fabric to afford to buy food in the midst of war; of ominous “mullahs” who teach “sequestered boys . . . in other rooms”; and of “hunkered robed men”, or Taliban terrorists who plot hateful conspiracies against the formation of a free, liberal society. “Burka Women” articulates the extremely pathetic condition of Afghan women who are forced to perform hard domestic duties, physically tortured by “religious police”, for sending their daughters to places of education, and have no alternative but to grieve over the murder of their intimate ones, committed by the evil Taliban. However, as the speaker of the poem asserts, the members of the Taliban themselves are physically insecure as they are attacked by “jet bombers sent by liberators”. The poem ends with an overt tone of optimism communicating that such socio-political condition soon will end, and be followed by the public recognition of all Afghan women:

... His dark eyes glint  
first light of Kabul. He hears a soft voice  
whisper, “Soon we’ll shed these veils  
and hoarded dreams, recognize our sisters  
in public, walk to work  
& our daughters to school. (113)

"Kabul 2002 (From Dislocations)" is an eyewitness account of Kabul, Parwan, Panjshir, Peshwar and Shalman. While Kabul welcomes the speaker not only with savage heat, dust and market-flies, but also with the sights of children being educated and of warm hospitality, Panjshir smacks only of abandonment and dereliction. He / She regrets that Peshwar is "not a gentle place" (160), "unsafe" (161), and constantly under the threat of terrorism; and Shalman, "where water and hope are rare / Where Kabul Kunduz Mazar are memories / And Peshwar only a thought" (161), is much worse than Peshwar.

The very vitality of these three poems depends on their ability to expose the reader to the empirical reality of Afghanistan with a sense of immediacy and with a willingness to get into the emotional world of its people, but without any preconception or stereotypical generalization. This kind of representation sharply contrasts with the representation of the same sort of reality through a prosaic set of "statistics" that allegedly characterized the previous American Orientalism. The empirical verifiability of these poems can be shown in reference to a number of sources including certain confidential United Nations documents obtained by Newsday, a media outlet, and cited in its report entitled "Taliban Atrocities: Confidential UN report details mass killings of civilian villagers" by a staff correspondent, Edward A. Gargan. The Newsday report dated October 12, 2001, directly claims that some confidential UN documents accessed by Newsday make responsible the members of the Taliban militia and the Taliban leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar, for deliberate contemporary massacres motivated by a desire to intensify control over northern and western Afghanistan. Moreover, according to those documents, as Newsday claims, there were witnesses to the radio conversations between Omar and the killers, found by the UN officials in charge of the investigation of the sequential massacres in Yakaolang.

After pointing out the denial of the Yakaolang killings by the Taliban in January, 2001, and the then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's desire for "a more thorough investigation" in April, 2001, the Newsday report adds that "UN staffers in Afghanistan collected eyewitness accounts of the massacres, visited mass graves of their victims, and in July, wrote a detailed 55-page report that they said was sent to Annan's office and to that of the UN High Commissioner for human rights, Mary Robinson." (n.pag) After a few paragraphs, the media report offers a detailed account of the process of the massacres:

Based on interviews with several hundred people who survived or who witnessed the massacres, as well as preliminary forensic work on grave sites, the report (UN report) was written to provide the basis for a prosecution of Taliban commanders and leaders for crimes against humanity. It describes victims being lined up, their hands tied behind their backs, shot and dumped in mass graves, of a young boy being skinned alive, of civilians being beaten to death, all during a two-week reign of terror by some of the Taliban's most senior commanders and Arab militants. (n.pag)

As for the verification of oppression of Afghan women by the Taliban, we can safely turn to the well-documented results of the three-month research on

Afghan women's health and human rights concerns and conditions, conducted by Physicians for Human Rights (PHR). As the report of this organization clearly points out:

The Taliban ... has targeted women for extreme repression and punished them brutally for infractions. To PHR's knowledge, no other regime in the world has methodically and violently forced half of its population into virtual house arrest, prohibiting them on pain of physical punishment from showing their faces, seeking medical care without a male escort, or attending school...Taliban policies that restrict women's rights and deny basic needs are often brutally and arbitrary enforced by the "religious police" (Department for the Propagation of Virtue and the Suppression of Vice) usually in the form of summary, public beatings.(2-3)

Among other sources for the oppression of Afghan women, mention must be made of "Afghan Women under the Taliban" by Nancy Dupree Hatch and *Women of Afghanistan in the Post-Taliban Era: How Lives Have Changed and Where They Stand Today*(2009) by the renowned American sociologist, Rosemarie Skaine, who almost echoes in her book the findings of PHR.<sup>8</sup>

The power of the three poems under discussion to bring us into direct, lively contact with the empirical reality of Afghanistan occasionally takes a metaphorical turn which functions as a link between factual and aesthetic planes of reality. In "The Weavers", for example, the pathetic condition of the poor Afghan refugee children is photographically represented, and then their embroidery attains a metaphorical dimension for suggesting their frustrated desire for a bountiful life. Towards the end of the poem, the act of weaving itself becomes metaphorical as it also applies to the terrorists who plot obnoxiously and self-destructively against liberty:

as hunkered robed men  
in caves  
weave hate,  
plotting against freedom  
& themselves. (112)

Though there is no remarkable metaphorical tendency in "Burka Woman", the poem intensely appeals to us due its thematic conflict between the forces of life and death, represented by the veiled Afghan women and the Taliban respectively. Same kind of conflict also characterizes "Kabul 2002 (From Dislocations)" where images of wildness and destruction are juxtaposed with those of education and hospitality:

Kabul greets you with destruction  
Plane carcasses lined up along the runway  
Ghosts of military welcomes past  
Bombed out hangars house bombed out planes  
Office buildings conduct business as usual  
Next to gaping holes in their facades

Kabul teaches its children  
 In half remaining rooms  
 Tarpaulins make up the difference  
 UN protection from the June sun  
 Classroom posters show the alphabet numbers landmines  
 The basics of Afghan literacy  
 . . .  
 The teachers invite us for tea  
 Later under their burqas  
 Screens muffling their voices their eyes  
 I remember their smiles (156-157)

The three poems, thus, not only evoke “a living reality” and suggest a limitation of Said’s first charge against American Orientalism— the historically conditioned nature of his argument, true only from the viewpoint of his own time- but also negate any probability of their complicity in the foregoing two of the so-called “old Orientalist” dogmas that Said pointed out. To explain, no binary opposition has been constructed in these poems either between the Orient and the West, or between Afghanistan and the West, on the basis of intellectual, humanistic and technological superiority. The binary that these poems do entail is between the good and the evil– which is alarmingly threatening and must be squashed– irrespective of any division along racial line, and Afghanistan represents both sides of the binary. So, the very idea of the Orient as “something either to be feared ... or to be controlled” (301) applies only to a part of Afghanistan, not to the whole of it.

Regarding Said’s next point that American Orientalist studies are a product of the imperial concerns of America, it is quite legitimate to point out that whether he was right or wrong in his own time, after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the idea of American empire has been rejuvenated by mass media and scholarly responses in a way that problematizes the ethical dimensions of the idea. In *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors* (2006), Charles S. Maier, a Harvard historian, for example, indicates that “Since September 11, 2001 . . . if not earlier, the idea of American empire is back . . . Now . . . for the first time since the early Twentieth century, it has become acceptable to ask whether the United States has become or is becoming an empire in some classic sense” (2-24). The observation of Niall Ferguson, another historian of the same university, is that though the idea was referred to in past in the context of criticism of American foreign policy, “In the past three or four years [2001-2004], however, a growing number of commentators have begun to use the term American empire less pejoratively, if still ambivalently, and in some cases with genuine enthusiasm” (3-4). And Ferguson himself in *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire*(2005), the book in which he makes this significant observation, proposes an idea of American empire which “might not be wholly bad” (vii-viii), to reconcile the opposition between American liberals who accept only the negative implication of the idea and American conservatives who completely deny its validity. However, this discussion on ethical complexity

underlying the idea of post-9/11 American empire is never complete from the standpoint of the chief purpose of this essay, if we do not take into account the question about moral validity of the American invasion of Afghanistan that greatly informs the thematic cores of the poems under discussion.

With regard to this point, we must turn to the ideas of just war theorists like Brian Orend who in *The Morality of War* (2006) argues in favour of this act of invasion. On the basis of “Core Principle on Aggression” (CPA) (37) and a “symmetrical relation” (73-74) on aggression, he argues that by consciously providing material assistance to a terrorist organization, al Qaida, who perpetrated aggression on a “minimally just” (36) state, that is, the United States, the Taliban also perpetrated aggression on the United States, and therefore deserved the exercise of “all necessary means” (37) for punishment.<sup>9</sup> However, in “Just War Theory and the Invasion of Afghanistan,” after a careful consideration of Orend’s just war theory, Mark Vorobej counterargues that as the Taliban did not literally perpetrate aggression, but merely functioned as a “material accomplice” (Orend 74), it was necessary for Orend to address the specific nature of the Taliban’s alleged assistance in reference to historical facts. Secondly, Vorobej thinks that Orend’s consideration of the Taliban’s non-cooperation with the American government as a justification for the American invasion, denies this regime’s willingness “to cooperate with the US and other nations on a plan that would have allowed the Americans to defeat al-Qaida without occupying Afghanistan” (47). Vorobej bases this idea upon the fact that “in October 2001, prior to November’s massive ground assault, the Taliban agreed to extradite Osama bin Laden to a neutral third country – most likely Pakistan – on the condition that the aerial bombardment ceased and they were provided with hard evidence of bin Laden’s involvement in the 9/11 attacks” (47). Vorobej also draws attention to the fact of America’s hasty aerial invasion started less than four weeks after 9/11, that Orend ignores and that indicates America’s “little interest in pursuing a careful and methodic legal resolution to the crimes under consideration” (48). This omission, as Vorobej claims, was instrumental in Orend’s ignoring the fact that “this aerial assault . . . conservatively estimated to have killed many hundreds of civilians that month (October, 2001) - was . . . arguably without UN authorization” (49). In addition to it, Vorobej argues that in Orend’s moral justification of American invasion “CPA operates pretty well independently of the other components and constraints of just war theory – especially proportionality –that require further factual input” (50), and that Orend has privileged the human rights of American citizens over those of their Afghan counterparts. Out of such apparently sympathetic concern with the Afghan citizens, Vorobej points out “the death and suffering that resulted within the Afghan population as a result of the American invasion” (51); a number of “grim facts” (51), confirming the extreme poverty of Afghans; and “an impending humanitarian crisis that placed over six million Afghans at risk of starvation” (53).

Now, Vorobej’s first point that Orend should have discussed the precise

nature of the Taliban's alleged aggression is quite legitimate and in this article I would like to fill in this gap in Orend's argument. According to *The 9/11 Commission Report* (2004):

The alliance with the Taliban provided al Qaeda a sanctuary in which to train and indoctrinate fighters and terrorists, import weapons, forge ties with other jihad groups and leaders, and plot and staff terrorist schemes. While Bin Ladin maintained his own al Qaeda guesthouse and camps for vetting and training recruits, he also provided support to and benefited from the broad infrastructure of such facilities in Afghanistan made available to the global network of Islamist movements. U.S. intelligence estimates put the total number of fighters who underwent instruction in Bin Ladin-supported camps in Afghanistan from 1996 through 9/11 at 10,000 to 20,000. (66-67)

This piece of information testifies to the point that the exact nature of the Taliban's crime was very serious and equivalent of al Qaida's. Secondly, the point about hard evidence that Vorobej has made, requires serious consideration. Presentation of hard evidence to the Taliban could jeopardize the national security of the United States as such evidence entails classified and other types of valuable information that could be easily available to al Qaida, given its close contemporary connection to the Taliban.<sup>10</sup> His next point that the war in Afghanistan was "arguably without U.N. authorization" is also of questionable legitimacy as, Ryan T. Williams demonstrates in "Dangerous Precedent: America's Illegal War In Afghanistan," "America's initial involvement in Afghanistan arguably comported with international law" (565). As to Vorobej's last point, it could be counterargued that Orend has, definitely, ignored such moral restraint as the principle of proportionality. But the same charge can also be brought against Vorobej himself. To explain, though Vorobej is apparently concerned with the sufferings of innocent Afghan civilians, he completely overlooks the Taliban's gross human rights violations noted earlier in this article and the post-war attempt at reconstruction of Afghanistan, that could turn the tables on the Taliban and support the American invasion.<sup>11</sup> In "Introduction" to *Afghan Modern: The History of a Global Nation* (2015), Robert D. Crews also acknowledges that in 2001 "Afghans became the object of an American-led humanitarian mission that was, simultaneously, a campaign to remake Afghans in the name of American security" (9). Regarding the points of Puar and Grewal, I must point out that Puar's work, which supports Drucilla Cornell's attitude to question the humanitarian-intervention discourse of the U.S. government for its silence about the objectionable, punitive state laws of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan regarding burqa, does not (nor does the work by Grewal) include any over-all comparative assessment of the socio-political condition of the Afghan women in the post-Taliban era, that could bring out the true motive behind such discourse to a certain extent. I must also invoke *Women of Afghanistan in the Post-Taliban Era: How Lives Have Changed and Where They Stand Today* by Rosemarie Skaine, which in its "Preface" points out the relatively good condition of Afghan women in the post-Taliban period; and *Understanding War in Afghanistan* (2011) by Joseph J Collins, which details the process of extensive

reconstruction of Afghanistan in the early post-war period, that was later disrupted by such factors as the resurgence of the Taliban, corruption within the Afghan government, failure of this government to build up adequate security forces and so on. Therefore, the very claims that American concern for Afghan women was an excuse for invasion of that country, and that Afghanistan has been destabilized by Western military occupation are questionable from historical standpoint.

Of the three poems, “Burka Women” explicitly equates the members of the Taliban who are “led by robed bearded men / hunkered in caves of shadows / & terror planning evil under sky,” with despicable villainous creatures, and the senders of jet bombers and tracer fire with “liberators,” who can bring about emancipation of Afghan women. In “Kabul 2002 (From Dislocations),” the speaker implicitly supports the process of reconstruction of Afghanistan following the destruction of the Taliban regime by American invasion. This attitude of the speaker is specially reflected in the lively, sympathetic representation of Afghan girls who “proudly recite their lesson / ‘The value of sharing water’ / And jostle to smile for our cameras” (157), and of female teachers who “invite us for tea / later under their burqas / Screens muffling their voices their eyes” (157). It could be safely concluded, therefore, that there is, definitely, an ideological connection between the post-9/11, literary study of Afghanistan and the U.S. invasion of the same, but the connection is hardly morally objectionable.

As to Said’s point about the American Orientalist outlook on Islam, it is worth noting that two of the three poems under discussion are interested rather in depicting the suspicious attitude of the Taliban mullahs who impart religious knowledge to Afghan boys in secret rooms, and in implicitly condemning “religious police” who brutally torture Afghan women, than in focusing on Islam. This representational shift on the one hand frees these poets of the charge of ‘totalization’ about Islam, and on the other lends empirical credibility to their mode of representation.<sup>12</sup> There is also the subtle suggestion in “The Weavers” that the Taliban mullahs may have complicity with the “hunkered robed men” to a certain degree, and are inseparably connected to the insidious ideological machinations of the Taliban terrorist regime, while the “hunkered robed men” stand for the violently coercive instrument of the same administration.

In the end, I would like to emphasize the point that the attitudinal shifts of the three poems discussed so far are significant in themselves and reinforced by the same kind of attitude of some other post-9/11 poems which have been influenced by Said’s text. Such shifts in perspective, therefore, can be very legitimately taken as an implicit creative response to Said’s stance on American Orientalism in *Orientalism*, a response that transcends the alleged limitations of the previous American Orientalism, offering imaginative insights into the psyche of Afghan women and children, and a materialist insight into the power structure of a terrorist system of government.

## Endnotes :

- <sup>1</sup> For the impact of 9/11 on American culture, society and life, see Mark A. Tabone, “Narrative Wreckage: Terror, Illness and Healing in the Post-9/11 Poethics of Claudia Rankine”, *Terror in Global Narrative: Representation of 9/11 in the Age of Late-Late Capitalism*, edited by George Fragopoulos and Liliyana M. Naydan, Springer Books and Business Media, Palgrave McMillan, 2016, pp. 95-117.
- <sup>2</sup> Generally speaking, according to Edward Said in *Orientalism*, an Orientalist is “Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient – and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or philologist – either in its specific or its general aspects” (2), and Orientalism is “what he or she does” (2). The term ‘American Orientalism’ in its general sense therefore refers to any act of teaching, or writing, or research about the Orient, undertaken by an American. I have used the term ‘American Orientalism’ in this sense throughout my article. Moreover, Goldstein’s words, “the kind of Orientalism that gathers all Muslims, or Arabs, into a monolithic category: The Enemy” may have been influenced by Edward Said, “Introduction”, *Orientalism*, Vintage Books, 1979, p. 5, where Said asserts that “... such locales, regions, geographical sectors as ‘Orient’ and ‘Occident’ are man-made” and that “... as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West.
- <sup>3</sup> For verification of the claim, “... a period characterized by an increased level of poetry reading and poetry writing”, see the first paragraph of Laurence Goldstein, “The Response of American Poets to 9/11: A Provisional Report”, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Vol. XLVIII, No. 1, (Winter 2009), <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?cc=mqr;c=mqr;c=mqrarchive;idno=act2080.0048.108;rgn=main;view=text;xc=1;g=mqrq>.
- <sup>4</sup> Though Varisco does not clarify the words ‘icon’ and ‘canon’ in “Preface to the 2017 Edition” of *Reading Orientalism: Said and the Unsaid*, a clarification of them can be found in “Introduction” to the same work, where he asserts that “For all its innovative force and inspite of its acknowledged flaws, this single volume (*Orientalism*) has been the subject of more debate and citation than any other text in and about that broad field once proudly ignored as Oriental studies” (3).
- <sup>5</sup> For major critical writings on *Orientalism*, see Robert Irwin, *Dangerous Knowledge: Orientalism and Its Discontents*, Overlook Press, 2008; Robert Irwin, “Edward Said’s Shadowy Legacy”. *Times Literary Supplement*. May 7, 2008. [http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/the\\_tls/article3885948.ece.;](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/the_tls/article3885948.ece.;) Bernard Lewis, “The Question of Orientalism”, *Islam and The West*, Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 99, 118; and Ibn Warraq, *Defending the West: A Critique of Edward Said’s Orientalism*, Prometheus Books, 2007. For the history of the academic debates sparked by *Orientalism*, see Daniel Martin Varisco, *Reading Orientalism: Said and the Unsaid*, University of Washington Press, 2017. For more sympathetic view of Said’s work, see Tahrir Khalil Hamdi, “Edward Said and Recent Orientalist Critiques”, *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 2, (Spring 2013), pp. 130-48. See also Richard Bulliet’s simultaneous identification of “errors and exaggerations in Said’s work” (66), and of “its undoubted theoretical weight and deep resonance with a broad range of critiques of Western ‘expertise’ about non-Western societies and traditions” (66). We should also consider the tendency

towards post-Orientalism, directed by Hamid Dabashi, that is, the willingness to acknowledge both the work's important contributions and its historically conditioned nature.

- <sup>6</sup> For knowledge of Islamic influence on Afghanistan, see Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp. 30-53; and Martin Evans, *Afghanistan: A New History* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), Routledge, 2002, p. 6. See also Kristin Mendoza, "Islam and Islamism in Afghanistan", *Islamic Legal Studies Program, Harvard* (2008). Moreover, for knowledge of the connection between Islam and Afghan politics from around 1800 to the present time, see Asta Olesen, *Islam and Politics in Afghanistan*, Routledge, 2013.
- <sup>7</sup> The term, "War on Terror", denotes the series of international battles and military actions against terrorism, with a special focus on countries connected to al-Qaeda, initiated by the U.S. government in the aftermath of 9/11. For the sources of the term, "War on Terror", see The White House, "Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People", 20<sup>th</sup> Sept., 2001; and also CNN., "Transcript of President Bush's Address", 20<sup>th</sup> Sept., 2001.
- <sup>8</sup> For oppression of Afghan women under the Taliban regime, see also Daniel J. Sherman and Terry Nardin (eds.), *Terror, Culture, Politics: Rethinking 9/11*, Indiana University Press, 2006, pp. 176-177; "A Vanished Gender: Women, Children and Taliban Culture" in Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: The Power of Militant Islam in Afghanistan and Beyond* (Revised ed.), I.B. Tauris, 2010.
- <sup>9</sup> According to "Core Principle on Aggression" articulated by Brian Orend in *The Morality of War*, "the commission of aggression by any aggressor A, against any victim V, entitles V – and/or any third-party vindicator T, acting on behalf of V – to employ all necessary means to stop A, including lethal force, *provided* that such means do not themselves violate human rights" (37). Moreover, in the context of the aggression of a non-state actor assisted by a state-actor, Orend writes: "war is justified *not only* against the non-state threat but the state sponsor as well. Aggression is, in this regard, a symmetrical relation: if Q (a non-state actor) commits aggression against R (a minimally just state), and Q had substantial support from P (a state actor) in doing so, then P also aggressed against R" (73-74).
- <sup>10</sup> See Kenneth Anderson, *What to do with Bin Laden and Al Qaeda Terrorists? A Qualified Defense of Military Commissions and United States Policy on Detainees at Guantanamo Bay Naval Base*, J.L& Pub. Pol'y, *supra* note 53, p- 609, where it is pointed out that though the 1980 Classified Information Procedures Act entails guidance on the presentation of sensitive information at trial in the U.S., the court proceedings become public; and that other valuable information might be easily accessed by the public as a result of a trial of an al Qaida terrorist in an open forum. These points suggest the damage to the U.S. national security that presentation of hard evidence to the Taliban could affect.
- <sup>11</sup> For post-war attempt at reconstruction of Afghanistan, see Joseph J. Collins, *Understanding War in Afghanistan*, National Defense University Press, 2011.
- <sup>12</sup> For knowledge of the term 'totalization' see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, London: Penguin Books, 1977; and Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, Duquesne University Press, 1969.

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# **STRANGER GODS, UNTOUCHABLE OFFSPRING: THE POLITICS OF SPACE AND HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY IN PERUMAL MURUGAN'S ONE PART WOMAN**

**Damini Kashyap**

## **Abstract**

The main aim of this article is to discuss the politics of carnivalesque space and hegemonic masculinity in *One Part Woman* (2013), the first book of Perumal Murugan's *Madhorugan* trilogy. The other two books are *Trial by Silence* (2018) and *A Lonely Harvest* (2018). Originally published in Tamil and later translated into English, the trilogy narrates the poignant story of a childless couple, Kali and Ponna, caught in their attempts to beget a child and the repercussions of those attempts. Although Murugan's treatment of the sensitive subject and its reception by the target audience has been the cause of much controversy in India, there has been limited academic discourse surrounding this trilogy. This article will try to address this gap. *One Part Woman* (2013) captures the story from the couple's early attempts at conceiving a child to the wife, Ponna, participating in the final day of the chariot festival at the temple of Madhorubagan, which customarily allows childless women to have sexual intercourse with 'stranger gods'. Such a union is considered sacred, and if the woman becomes pregnant, the child born is considered a gift of god. Taking this as a point of departure, this article questions and deconstructs the notion of the liberating nature of the carnivalesque space of the chariot festival by revealing the subtle ways in which the apparently fulfilling marital relationship of the central characters is doomed by the male partner's masculine arrogance. Through the Bakhtinian concept of the carnivalesque and Connell's theorisation of hegemonic masculinity, this article will show how Kali's hegemony prevents Ponna from finding a liberating space for herself in the chariot festival. Unable to overcome Kali's psychological dominance, Ponna ultimately becomes a victim of his hegemonic masculinity. Thus, by highlighting the politics of carnivalesque space and hegemonic masculinity in Murugan's novel, this article fills in the existing research gap and opens up the text to more critical analyses in the future.

**Keywords :** Madhorubagan trilogy, *One Part Woman*, Chariot Festival, Carnivalesque Space, Hegemonic Masculinity.

The noted Indian writer and scholar Perumal Murugan has, in recent years, been at the receiving end of both critical acclaim and controversy following the

publication of *One Part Woman* (2013), the first book of his *Madhorubagan* trilogy. This book has two sequels: *A Lonely Harvest* (2018) and *Trial by Silence* (2018). Originally written in Tamil as *Madhorubagan* (2010), *Aalavaayan* (2014), and *Ardhanaari* (2014), the trilogy was translated into English by the renowned researcher, writer, performer, and LGBTQ activist Aniruddh Vasudevan. He was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Translation Award (2016) for his translation of the first book, which was also included in the longlist for the 2018 National Book Award in the “Translated Literature” category.

*One Part Woman* is the story of a couple, Kali and Ponna, who have remained childless after twelve years of marriage. Despite a sexually satisfying life, their efforts to conceive a child go in vain. They leave no stone unturned, trying every herb, remedy, ritual, and sacrifice. Starting from her mother-in-law's bitter concoction, a tarot reading, and the sacrifice and *pongal*<sup>1</sup> offered at the temple on top of the hill, Kali and Ponna do everything in their capacity to become pregnant. The real test of their conjugal life comes when Ponna is urged by their family members to participate in the chariot festival at the temple of Madhorubagan<sup>2</sup>, the half-female god. Their fate depends on that one night when every single rule is relaxed and consensual union between any man and woman is sanctioned. The ambiguous ending of the novel projects the fate of Kali, who is tricked into accepting Ponna's participation in the event despite all their reservations.

The depiction of the festival of Madhorubagan, with the ritual of consensual sexual union between strangers, invited controversy for the author, so much so that he had to apologise in public and withdraw all copies of his novel. In 2015, he announced that he would give up writing and posted on his Facebook page: “Perumal Murugan the writer is dead. As he is no God, he is not going to resurrect himself. He also has no faith in rebirth. An ordinary teacher, he will live as P. Murugan. Leave him alone.” A series of lawsuits were filed in the Madras High Court; the verdict, which was given in 2016 and stressed the literary and artistic freedom of individuals, came out in his favour. Consequently, Perumal Murugan resumed writing and published two sequels to this controversial novel.

The main aim of this article is to discuss the politics of carnivalesque space and hegemonic masculinity in *One Part Woman* (2013). In doing so, it questions and deconstructs the notion of the liberating nature of the carnivalesque space and reveals the subtle ways in which the apparently fulfilling marital relationship of the protagonists is doomed by Kali's masculine arrogance.

This article conducts a textual analysis of primary and secondary texts. Within the broad theoretical framework of gender studies, it uses the concepts of Bakhtin's carnivalesque, space theory, and Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity. The article is divided into two sections. The first section attempts to read the chariot festival at the temple of Madhorubagan as an instance of Bakhtin's carnivalesque. The second section takes on a deconstructive approach and questions the liberating nature of the festival itself, revealing the ways in

which Kali's rigid hegemonic masculinity is a hindrance to the liberating nature of the carnivalesque space for Ponna, thereby defeating the basic nature of the Bakhtinian concept itself.

Bakhtin's book, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1963), highlights four important characteristics of the term "carnivalesque": familiar and free interaction between people, eccentric behaviour, carnivalistic mesalliances, and profanation. Carnivals often bring the unlikeliest of people together and encourage their interaction and free expression in unity. They encourage unacceptable or eccentric behaviour while disregarding consequences. Moreover, the familiar and free format of the carnival allowed the intermingling of elements generally perceived as disparate and distant from each other – heaven and hell, the old and the young. Finally, in carnivals, the strict rules of piety and respect for official notions of the 'sacred' are stripped and condemned; instead, blasphemy, obscenity, and debasement are celebrated and everyone is brought down to earth. A common phenomenon underpins these characteristics – subversion. The space of the carnival is essentially a space of subversion, where all established rules and norms are broken to facilitate a free play of will. Freed of boundaries, unaccepting of limitations, it transforms into a place of possibilities and liberation.

The most obvious and apparently innocent understanding of the festival posits it as a Bakhtinian carnival. The feast of the half-female god, Madhorubagan<sup>2</sup>, comprises almost all of the four characteristics of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque. The first characteristic of familiar and free interaction between people, irrespective of caste and class divisions, is seen in many instances in the novel. For example, Ponna's father agrees to take Maran and his family in his cart at their request. Maran works as a farm hand in Periyasami's farm in Veliyur and under normal circumstances, a high-caste man would not travel in the same cart as a low-caste man. Only the feast of the Madhorubagan could induce such a thing.

Once they are at the festival site, Ponna is startled by the behaviour of the people around her. Away from her mother, clad in a beautiful dress, she gets lost in an ocean of strangers.

She looked around for anyone she knew from the village. No one. Any relatives? Anyone she had worked with in the fields? From within her mind, she brought out several faces that she had known since childhood and checked to see if any of the faces in the crowd now matched any of those from her mind's inventory. None. Even if any face matched, it might not mean anything. Once people entered such a large crowd, everyone becomes a new, unknown face. (Murugan 202)

In such a large crowd, eccentric behaviour almost becomes the norm. Bare-bodied dances of men with clashing sticks inspired a sense of awe as well as fear. The vigour of the glistening bodies is juxtaposed with the sweat from the interlocked bodies. Ponna feels a few suggestive caresses on her body: "While she

was thinking about this, she felt a touch on her right arm. She was not able to turn immediately. She felt a lack of desire in that touch....It was merely the body working" (Murugan 205). She has to dodge a number of eccentricities until she finds her god.

The liberated format of the carnival allows 'unnatural alliances', as perceived by prevalent norms, which Bakhtin calls carnivalistic mesalliances.

At the peak of the celebration, all rules were relaxed. The night bore witness to that. Any consenting man and woman could have sex. Bodies would lie casually intertwined. Darkness cast a mask on every face. It is in such revelry that the primal being in man surfaces. (Murugan 98)

In a rigid, caste-based society, the chariot festival at the temple of Madhorubagan sanctions free interaction among people of all castes. Kali remembers visiting the festival with Muthu before his marriage and losing his virginity to a girl from a lower caste. Moreover, in normal circumstances, Ponna could not even imagine watching a theatrical performance pregnant with puns and double meanings with a group of strangers. But in the festival, she is shown sitting in close proximity with a group of strangers, young and old alike, and watching the theatrical performance.

The reference to the theatrical performance brings us to the last characteristic of Bakhtin's carnivalesque, namely, profanation. Carnivals blur the very thin line between the sacred and the profane and celebrate blasphemy and obscenity. When the announcer of the play starts explaining the play's concept as well as context, his words are constantly interrupted by a clown who finds fissures in every sentence for puns and jokes. His puns straddle the border between sanctity and blasphemy, debasing gods to the level of humans and lifting humans to the level of divinity:

The clown had to rupture all this bombast! He said, 'This man says the gods and goddess roamed around the villages. But are they jobless like you? Wherever they roam about, they have to come back home eventually. That's why we have this eighteenth day of the festival. All right, what was it you said about Ammaithazhumbu<sup>3</sup>, the chickenpox scar?'

The announcer was ready to handle this pun on words. 'Not Ammaithazhumbu, pa. I said Ammaiyanappan<sup>4</sup>, the mother-father form.'

The clown who was on a roll by now, replied, 'Oh, you mean your mother and your father? Okay. Didn't you say something else? Something about Madhiyaanasoru<sup>5</sup>, the afternoon meal? You were mentioning that you and I didn't eat lunch, weren't you?' (Murugan 213-214)

Creating confusion out of the words signifying the mother-father form and the chickenpox scar, the clown stages a repartee referring to the word of address (the more respectful "pa" and the less respectful "da") used by the announcer. Then he describes his wealth at length. After this, he persists in asking about lunch. Irritated beyond measure, the announcer keeps clarifying that he did not talk about lunch, *madhiyaanasoru*, but the deity, Madhorubagan.

The clown switched to mock anger now, and said, ‘Hey! What is this? You are using the “da” too often now!’ Then he lamented his bad fate: ‘Why should I have to struggle with this disrespectful man! All right. So, Madhiyaanasoru means to be half male and half female? So they stay right next to each other? But what’s the use if they can’t touch each other?’

The announcer was now disgusted at these sacrilegious remarks. ‘Chee!’ he said. ‘Don’t say such dirty things on this auspicious day. You will land up in hell for the next seven births.’

‘Oh! So you think you will go to the glorious heaven?’ retorted the clown. ‘When you die, no one will even volunteer to decorate your hearse. People come only when you have amassed some wealth. You have nothing.’

Then he turned to the audience, and continued, ‘In the morning, you will see him buying some puttu on credit from the poor woman.’

Back to addressing the announcer, the clown said, ‘What uncouth thing did I say? I said that male and female sides touch each other despite being so close. What’s wrong with that? You and I came about because they touched, isn’t it? You call this dirty?’ (Murugan 215)

This long conversation between the clown and the announcer is significant in many ways. First, the clown’s words bring the announcer’s lofty ideals down to the level of basic earthly existence. For instance, when the announcer talks about worshipping the half-female god, Madhorubagan, the clown interrupts to ask about madhiyaanasoru, the afternoon meal. When the discussion is about worshipping Ammaiappan, the clown talks about ammaithazhumbu or the chickenpox scar. Moreover, the clown debunks the concept of human deeds leading to either heaven or hell and instead imagines them completely on the basis of affluence. Finally, by repeatedly insisting on the essential unity of the two sexes for the purpose of procreation, the clown celebrates the true spirit of the deity and derides the veil of propriety that people like the announcer imposes on the earthly enjoyment of basic bodily instincts.

The preceding discussion situates the festival of Madhorubagan in the context of Bakhtin’s carnival. However, there are certain other questions that we need to explore. If it’s a carnival, who is in a more advantageous position – Kali or Ponnu? If carnivals ought to liberate individuals irrespective of their social affiliations, does the chariot festival truly liberate anyone in Murugan’s trilogy? If we consider Kali’s perspective as the text’s primary narrative perspective, what happens to the space of the carnival?

To find the answers to these questions, we need to understand the concept of hegemonic masculinity as formulated by theorists like R. W. Connell and James Messerschmidt. Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (77). Connell and Messerschmidt later reworked this definition in their essay “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept” (2005). The following passage

from this essay is important for this discussion:

Hegemonic masculinity was distinguished from other masculinities, especially subordinated masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honoured way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimised the global subordination of women to men. (832)

These passages illustrate the essential nature of hegemonic masculinity. Wielding enormous physical and/or psychological power over suppressed groups (including women), hegemonically masculine groups become the norm in a social setting. By continually justifying their hold over power, these groups ensure its perpetual retention in their hands. The ideological legitimisation of the global subordination of women by men is the most striking characteristic of hegemonic masculinity. Equipped with the understanding of Connell's theorisation, the next part of this article looks at Kali's masculinity from the hegemonic standpoint while also examining its impact on Ponna.

From the beginning of the novel, Kali's sense of his masculinity is defined by Ponna's allegiance to him. He takes pride in her devotion to him, and although he consoles her when she menstruates every month, her regular menstruation is a matter of reassurance to him:

When she menstruated every month, she came to sit and cry in the barn. It was consoling to bury her face in his lap. He'd ruffle her hair and say, 'Let it go. We should be used to it by now'. But she kept hoping things would change. Sometimes, her crying made him cry too. So they cried together, lamenting their fate. Ironically, it made him happy on the inside whenever she got her periods on time and came crying to him. The way his mind worked, she was trustworthy as long as she was menstruating regularly.

Subsequently, he reasoned: 'Poor thing. How can I be so suspicious because of just one thing she said? She only said it in the urge to do something to have a child of her own. Does that mean I can conclude she would go with any man? Didn't she come to me complaining about Karuppannan's advances? She said what she said because of me- she said it for me. She said, "I will go if you ask me to". And I didn't ask her to. Then why would she go?' This made him treat her with affection, and it looked as though the Kali she knew was back. (Murugan 119)

Kali's ego is soothed only by Ponna's obedience and fidelity although he knows very well that his sterility is the cause of their childlessness. He does not agree when his mother and in-laws propose sending Ponna to the chariot festival celebrated in honour of Madhorubagan in the hill shrine of Karattur. He feels her going would be a severe insult to his masculinity – if she became pregnant with a

child out of that night's union with a god, he would have to bear the inward, biting, and lifelong brunt of his infertility. His conversation with Muthu regarding sending Ponna to the festival is significant:

'You tell me. If your wife was childless, would you have sent her with a stranger?'

'Mapillai. Don't call him a stranger. Who remembers faces? All men are gods that night. Think of him as god, you might even feel happy about it. Isn't it a great blessing if our child comes from god? Haven't you heard people remark, "This child is a boon from god"? Those children were born exactly this way, mapillai.'

'When you and I went, were we gods? All we wanted was to find some decent-looking women to fuck, didn't we? Did you ever think of yourself as a god?'

'It does not matter what we thought of ourselves. If the women get children because of us, we become gods for them.' (Murugan 139)

Kali mocks Muthu's proposal, saying, "Really?! All men there are radiant with divinity, roaming around holding their cocks in their hands" (Murugan 139). He dismisses the proposal, calling it an illogical custom of ignorant people that does not have any practical value now. He instead questions whether Muthu would have sent his wife if he were in Kali's place. Rejecting Muthu's arguments, Kali then puts forward his own:

'You are so old-fashioned, Muthu', snapped Kali. 'Earlier, a woman could be with however many men as long as they were all from the same caste. Even related castes were fine. But if she went with an 'untouchable', they excommunicated her. Is that how it works today? We insist that a woman should be with just one man from the same caste. Then how would this work? More than half the young men roaming about town are from the untouchable castes. If any one of them gets to be with Ponna, I simply cannot touch her after that. I cannot even lift and hold the child. Why do I need all that? I am happy lying around here. I don't want a child so desperately. Moreover, all of you will call me impotent and laugh at me. So, let it go.'(Murugan 140)

This conversation reveals a striking aspect of Kali's character. His arrogance regarding his masculinity comes in the way of our understanding of the liberal nature of the chariot festival. Recalling the questions posed before, if the custom of childless women going to the festival in hopes of getting pregnant by stranger "gods" has been socially sanctioned and practised for many years, the stance taken by Kali in this regard is against the sanctioned liberalism of the society because he objects to Ponna having sexual intercourse with an "untouchable" god as, according to him, such an act on her part would pollute him and his entire family. Therefore, a child born out of such a union would be not only unacceptable but also an object of disgust for him. This highlights the dynamics of caste when we consider Kali's masculinity. He is not ready to disregard the caste hierarchy even when it is socially sanctioned and would help

him beget a child that he could call his own. In other words, his masculine arrogance is supplemented by his caste pride.

When he learns about Ponna's actions, he calls her a "whore" in *Trial by Silence* (2018), in which he survives his attempted suicide. He is unable to forgive her and considers her action as an unhealable wound to his marriage and life. If we look at the second book, *A Lonely Harvest* (2018), we do not find his presence at all as he has already succumbed to his attempts to kill himself. Irrespective of his survival, what we can surmise is that his hyper-masculine arrogance crushes both himself and his loved ones. In such a context, the apparently liberal space of the carnival becomes suffocating for both Kali and Ponna. It does not prove advantageous for anyone, unlike the old *vellapillai* woman in their village who had two children by copulating with gods during the chariot festival.

If we take Kali's perspective as the narrative perspective, the carnivalesque space of the festival does not pose as an immaculate paradise. Although this third space overthrows the socially established hierarchies and encourages mesalliances, it proves detrimental to people like Ponna because even in such a liberal space, Ponna is not able to overthrow Kali's influence from her mind. In her search for the god, the first face that comes to her mind is that of Kali. In every gesture and movement of the men that she comes into contact with, her first point of reference is Kali. Thus, even in the liberal space favouring carnivalesque mesalliances, Ponna is not free of Kali's dominance. Therefore, we can say that the narrative overturns the apparently innocent understanding of the carnival at the hill shrine of Karattur as a liberal third space and instead posits the same as one that upholds the ideological hegemony of Kali over Ponna and inflicts psychological violence upon her. Finally, by insisting upon childbirth as a necessity and society's relaxation of norms to allow this 'essential' function to take place, the narrative continues the patriarchal discourse that bestows divinity upon men who can impregnate women.

This discussion problematises the dynamics of space instrumental in the performance of individuals' identities in a carnivalesque setting. Intriguing us with pertinent questions regarding Kali's performance of his hegemonic masculinity, it deconstructs the notion of the liberating nature of the carnivalesque space and reveals subtly powerful ways in which the apparently fulfilling marital relationship is doomed by the male partner's masculine arrogance. Unravelling an interesting dimension of human psychology and performance, the first book of the *Madhorubagan* trilogy, *One Part Woman* (2013), provides us an engaging deconstructive read.

### **Endnotes :**

<sup>1</sup> Pongal- a southern Indian dish of rice cooked with various herbs and spices that is also a ceremonial offering.

<sup>2</sup> Madhorubagan- name given to the androgynous deity of Shiva/Parvati

<sup>3</sup> Ammaithazhumbu- chickenpox scar

<sup>4</sup> Ammaiappan- the mother-father form of the androgynous deity

<sup>5</sup> Madhiyaanasoru- the afternoon meal; lunch

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## AESTHETICS OF THE GROTESQUE BODY: THE DISMEMBERMENT METAPHOR IN THE ASSAMESE FOLKTALE “TEJIMOLA”

**Jharna Choudhury**

### **Abstract**

The exaggerated bodily perimeters with the poetry of ugly bridges the collective thought of variegated cultural worlds. This paper talks about death and femininity through the botanical reincarnate of the flesh, the grotesque trope and the metaphor of dismembered body. The ancient oral folktale “Tejimola” has been chronicled in early twentieth-century development in literature, a rendition of the Assamese writer Lakshminath Bezbaroa in his book *Burhi Air Xadhu* (*Grandmother’s Tales*). This version is a regional configuration of the physical grotesque of Northeast India’s folktales, which has a resonance of the Cinderella narrative. “Tejimola” has been a part of popular cinematic adaptations over time. The feminine, the mother/ stepmother figure, her maternity and metamorphoses are associated with the bizarre image of food, as a catalyst of annihilation and renewal. Through the banquet imagery of Mikhail Bakhtin’s reading of Rabelais, discussion of “literary death” (Sander L Gilman), re-presentations of dead bodies (in Elisabeth Bronfen and Elizabeth Grosz), this paper observes the cultural implications of hunger, orifices and body fluids in the Assamese folktale context. The subjectivity of the victimized female does not die with death; she is rather agential through her own elegiac songs. The use of literary devices manipulates the body horror of dismemberment, pertaining to the degree of reception of the audience/ reader. It is in death that the feminine breaks the constraints of body boundaries, undertaking newer embodiments in earthly, unearthly sources, being the architect of her origin.

**Keywords :** Assamese folktale, Tejimola, Grotesque aesthetics, Dismemberment metaphor, Female Body

The noticeable oppressed motifs and the popular stepmother tale-specimen has given a fair amount of light to the Assamese folktale “Tejimola”; mostly, as a rendition of oral literature connected to the world-wide Cinderella cycle. The authorship of such narratives has always been in question due to the identity politics of the tribal and non-tribal groups and the language variations. “Tejimola” came to the fore as a children’s tale; chronicled from the oral tradition to Assamese literature in the collection of stories “*Burhi Air Xadhu*” (1911). The

title establishes the grandmother as the storyteller of the Assamese household. Under the tutelage of the writer of humour, Lakshminath Bezbaroa (1864-1938), this collection of stories could finally give shape to the folklore of Assam and open ways of connecting to the North-Eastern Indian folktales, "tribal" Indian folktales and the corpus of work done by Bopp, Herder and the Grimm brothers. Bezbaroa, in his Preface, mentioned that folktales are significant cultural indicators; and Tejimola's narrative undoubtedly preserves social issues like polygamy of merchants, infant deaths, trade travels, stereotype of stepmother's jealousy, domestic violence, socially accepted magic realism and riddles from the dead people. In contrast to the discourse of passively dead female corpses, this paper renegotiates the idea of femininity and death in terms of resurrection (as in Toni Morrison's character Beloved, Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus", Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Melquíade*), grotesque plantation of the human body (as in J.M. Coetzee's character Michael K, who plants the ashes of his dead mother) and posthumously active (as in Addie Bundren, in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*). Such dynamic iterations of corpses who self reports the unsaid story of his/her death or reappears as an absent/present body, gives a novel dimension to the aesthetics of the corporal as hyperbolic, grotesque and uncanny.

The phrase "grotesque aesthetics" is an oxymoron in itself. While the word grotesque is connected to the elements of gross, excess, ugly, repulsive, horrific and gothic, the word aesthetics mostly imply the philosophy of the beautiful. In the book *On Ugliness*, Umberto Eco rightly states that ugliness and grotesque are polysemic in nature and on being revisited they are seen as constructions of "socio-political criteria" (Eco 12). In the very heart of the collection "Burhi Air Xadhu", is the metaphor of ecdysis or molting like that of the snake, a rather "ugly" conceptualization for children stories. Bezbaroa's Tejimola, the coming of age protagonist, is killed by her stepmother, pounded into pulp, under the rice pounding "dheki" (manual grinder-like instrument). Her renewal happens in agrarian forms: types of vegetable, fruit and bird; common to the Assamese culture. Like molting, Tejimola changes her skin. Similar affinity is found in the other stories of the same collection, where the story "Tula and Teja" has bodily transformations from a woman to a tortoise, trees and bird; Panesai is hatched from an egg and becomes a duck, Champavati's husband is a god reincarnate as a snake, Ou Kuori is a girl inside the shell of an elephant apple. The exterior body peels off, breaks, or is burnt with the story progression. The identity of the flesh is bizarre as well as culturally rooted. Moulting is the inception of the dismemberment metaphor. Elizabeth Grosz saw such types of bodies as "not only inscribed, marked, engraved, by social pressure external to them but are the products, the direct effects of the very social constitution of nature itself" (Grosz x). It is however difficult to make a clear cut distinction between the types of body metaphors, as source domain or target domain, employed by Juliana Goschler in her essay "Embodiment and Body Metaphors". The metaphoric mapping in Tejimola is such that the distortions of body leads to comprehension of the cultural life, which makes the metaphor source domain, but when the vegetal nature of Tejimola leads us to her human body, then the metaphor turns

into target domain. Here, one domain is interconnected with one another, slipping inside, like a möbius strip (Elizabeth Grosz), or one domain mapped onto another (Goschler).

In *A Handbook of Folklore Material of North-East India*, the narrative of Tejimola appears as a wonder tale. This version is extracted by the writer Birendranath Datta, from J. Barooah's book *Folktales of Assam* (1963). We can loosely divide the story in the following structure, with the purpose of locating the types of dismemberment:

- a) the exposition: includes the death of Tejimola's biological mother, the hatred of her childless stepmother, who saw Tejimola as a rival of love for the father figure (the merchant);
- b) the social obligation of the father as the breadwinner, his merchandise, trade travels and a prolonged departure, separation from the most beloved daughter;
- c) stepmother's scheme of ill-treatment, fault finding, which leads to the final plan of murder to eschew Tejimola's upcoming dowry;
- d) the pretext of the friend's marriage: Tejimola's escape from her stepmother's cruelty for few days parallels the ball motif in the Cinderella cycle;
- e) the role of dress: the best garment is used as an alibi to attack the victim Tejimola, in this case, "a lovely silk *riha* and fine silk *mehkela* and a gold-embroidered *khonia* wrapper" (Datta 240), which is folded into a parcel with a mouse and a handful of embers inside;
- f) discovery: the shreds of the garment shock Tejimola, and on her return after the wedding, she is brutally beaten up for the loss;
- g) the body violence magnifies when she is being dragged to the assigned place of death, the rice pounding dhekki, the symbolic guillotine;
- h) the rhythmic supply of paddy in the hole is disturbed and the stepmother pounds Tejimola's body parts one by one, leading to dismemberment and demise;
- i) hiding of the dead body: her pulp was accumulated and hidden in the eaves of the rice pounding shed, and she grew back as a pumpkin plant, discovered by a beggar woman; she re-grew as a shaddock tree, discovered by the cowherds, then into a lotus plant/water-lily in the river to be discovered by the boatman and her returning father;
- j) the validation of truth: Tejimola transforms into a bird (myna) and validates her truth by eating her father's chewed areca; then she submits to the comforting cage of her father;

- k) back at home, the confrontation begins; through magic, the father transforms Tejimola into a human again;
- l) the merchant drove his wife away, and in some versions asked her to walk a thread on top of a well, where she falls and dies owing to her falsity.

In the line of thought of Edwin Sidney Hartland's (in *The Science of Fairytales*) idea of märchen and Dean Thompson's motif index (in *Motif Index of Folk-Literature*), well known Assamese folklore researcher Prafulladatta Goswami (Ballads and Tales of Assam) remarks of the tale as "a world where birds and beasts think like men and where things change their form whenever it is necessary" (Goswami 84-85). The dismemberment is widespread in the twelve points we have structured in the tale. To reconfigure the body as the centre of ideas and not a dualistic compromised "other" of the mind, Elizabeth Grosz overcomes the "common metaphors that have been used to describe the interactions of mind and body, metaphors of embodiment, of containment, machine metaphors, two-sided coins, hydraulic models" (Grosz xii). The use of the dismemberment metaphor aligns with Grosz's use of Lacan's *möbius* strip, a model where body and mind are both integrated with the other. The narrative of Tejimola begins with her separation from the maternal body leaving her with her father. Her stepmother intervenes with hatred and jealousy, causing a filial dismemberment of the original structure. The separation, which was at the behest of a psychological conflict, turns physical with the departure of the merchant father. This builds the ground for inflicting torture. The stepmother, shown as a villainous character (in the surface level), plots against the victim girl, commanding Herculean household tasks, and in the real sense of the term breaks her back with sticks and brooms. Popular cinematic representation of the story in *Kothanodi* (2015 feature film, based on renditions of Tejimola, Champawati, Ou Kuwori and Tawoir Xadhu) has developed a catalyst to instigate villainy in the stepmother. This catalyst figure is a grotesque body type, sometimes an old hag with a hunchback, sometimes a ghostly forest figure with carnal traits. It is an inclusion to the oral narrative and Lakshminath Bezbaroa's story. However, we cannot totally neglect the fact that Tejimola's mother is a foil to the innocent and complacent nature of her daughter, and such female with agency have often been shown in a dangerous light in fairytales (Christy Williams). It is only through the grotesque trope which has historically challenged authority (king, dictators) and literary canon that the marginal women in the story partake in an active role.

Tejimola is not an isolated being, detached from societal communications. She confides to a friend about her problems. But it is her friend's marriage and the consequent lack of proximity ordained by the patriarchal set up that is to eventually isolate her. With marriage comes the question of inheritance of the mother's clothes. *Riha*, *mehkela* and *khonia* are garments that embody this aspect. In Tejimola's case, her stepmother lends her the traditional garments with malice. Tejimola, on reaching her friend's house opens the parcel to find dismembered pieces of clothes. In this context, the sheds of clothes appear as a dismemberment metaphor, a prolepsis to her body decadence. Dismemberment

is a signifier which has plural significations in a socially constructed feminine world; exemplars being clitoridectomy or clitorectomy, female fetishization, which shreds the body with biased interests in specific body part (mostly sexual organs). However, in this text Tejimola is a prototype of dead women speaking back to claim one's already dismantled stature as a confined woman in the house, thereby posthumously claiming mobility. To quote "these dead women, at least the more literary ones, constitute a tradition sin which writers address pressing social issues that refuse to stay dead" (Norman 1). In Tejimola's story, it is the patriarchal kinship structure, hierarchy, land rights and the confinement/unspeakability of women.

In the essay, "Representing Dead and Dying Bodies", Sandra L. Gilman explores two types of death; one, when aesthetics disbelieve the reality of death and preserves the body through literature and art, the other being the Hellenistic tradition that de-aestheticized death with realism. When we talk about the material body of Tejimola, although there is a portrayal of body horror in her dying, she undergoes a type of literary death, preserved in amber of words, through Bezbaroa's work. To quotes, "Literary death is in truth a denial of death" (Maude et al. 151). The death of Tejimola ensue multiple metamorphosed body types. A significant thing to note here is the attribute of fluidity and mobility explored by these new metaphors. The pumpkin plant which is the first manifestation of Tejimola after death is a creeper which has some agentiality on its own accord. Like the pumpkin, the shaddock fruit, the second manifestation of Tejimola, has a similarity of form. The texture of the outer cover differs from the inward flesh, analogous to the human form. The body fluids ooze on being smashed. The third manifestation of the dead woman as the lotus, floating unfixed in the river, is a testimony of her liminality. The regulation of these three metamorphosed feminine bodies is incomplete without the perspective of the stepmother as the "other" creator, integrally involved in the process. The dismemberment metaphor connects the two obvious women in the story: Tejimola and her mother, the one who endures and the perpetrator (always debatable) respectively. The stepmother dislocates Tejimola from her roots, in any living form, forcing her to recreate her own body. Like Frankenstein's monster Tejimola's body is resurrected not only in corporeality, but also in the act of reading the story again and again, or recreating it in film, poetry (Nitoo Das's "Tejimola", Uddipana Goswami's "Tejimola Forever") and fiction (Aruni Kashyap's *His Father's Disease*). "Whether heralded or denied, this notion of a death denied through the act of reading is the lynchpin of literary deaths" (Maude et al. 155). The unending interpretations of the story makes Tejimola's body a palimpsest of its own kind.

If the structure of the house is the location of Tejimola as a woman, her dead body is continually distanced from it. The stepmother performs as a synergist, while Tejimola transfigures her fluids into other kinds. From the interior of the house she is dragged away to the point of death (the dheki house), from there she is hidden in the "eaves of the rice pounding shed" (Datta 241). The

sight of the creeping pumpkin plant shakes the conscience of the stepmother. "The merchant's wife understood what it was and went with a knife to the spot and cut the plant off, root and all, and threw it away in a remote corner of her garden" (Datta 242). Tejimola's subhuman identity is expressed in language as "it" a thing, waiting for a cut. The brutal act of the knife causes a second death to Tejimola. She then physically moves away from her house to the garden area, transforming into a juicy shaddock, as if sexually tempting the cowherds. The stepmother then "went to the spot and uprooted it completely and threw it into the river" (Datta 242). The river is the farthest location from the house, in the storyline. It is the exterior where Tejimola is pushed to. Soon "in one of its shallow pools, it rested as a lovely water-lily" (Datta 242). Rest here essentially means a grave. "If you be really my own Tejimola you will appear as a myna and chew the areca on my left hand...The lily at once transformed into a myna" (Datta 243).

The analogy of women as the embodiment of food has been a part of Assamese folktales, analogous to the folktale literature around the world. The grotesque nature of feasting is latent in Bezbaroa's story. Elizabeth Grosz insists on avoiding a metaphor which implies a structural homology or one-to-one-correlation. Instead, meanings should be plural, twisted, ambiguous. The treatment of Tejimola can be related to the role of the banquet by Bakhtin; to do so the feasting images need to be extended in the following manner of meaning-making:

- a) the beggar woman wants to eat the pumpkin also becomes the beggar woman wants to eat Tejimola;
- b) the cow herders want to pluck the shaddock, cut it open and relish; this implies the sexual interest of the cow herders, where the fruit resembles a woman with body fluids;
- c) Tejimola transforms into a myna bird and chews on the areca spat out by her father; a view of ejection which hints at Rabelais' Gargantua and Pantagruel images of feasting at one's own body fluids.

Tejimola is seen as an essential property/ object of love to her father, and hence his own self, whose proximity is culturally defined by this image of ingestion. This can be related to the latent carnivalesque of the lower strata of society. It is their act of feasting, which mocks the established order of edible and inedible food. In this case, there is a parallel mockery of the animate and inanimate body of Tejimola. To quote, "food images are connected with those of the body and of procreation (fertility, growth, birth)" (Bakhtin 279). In folktales, according to Bakhtin, death is not the end of the story, but it has the potentiality of new beginnings, in this case, hinted by the banquet imagery. If we consider the dismemberment images of the beggar woman devouring Tejimola's dead body or the cow herders relishing her, the story reconstructs itself into newer models of anthropophagus and necrophiliac individuals. Such type of imagery is relatable to

the body-oriented metaphors like “the rhizome, assemblage, machine, desire, multiplicity, becoming, and the Body without Organs (BwO)” (Grosz 167). It re-centres the location of death, making it multidimensional. Recent developments of vegetal intelligence in the field of botany, performance studies, culture, hermeneutics talk about the somatic being, recreating its rhizomatic thread; theories forwarded by M. Marder, T. Morton, A. Olsen, M. Hall, L. Irigaray, M. Gagliano, D. Chamovitz, etc. They see the plant-being (in our case Tejimola) as instinctive, self-created, with negative and positive gravitropism (D. Chamovitz), with judgment of thinking (Marder draws from Hegel), capable of adapting and resurrecting. However, when the vegetal becomes corporeal in effect, the addition and deduction which goes into the picture of the human anatomy gives rise to a spectral grotesqueness, a flesh drama. The aesthetics of blood is a development streamed from Bezbaroa's Tejimola-tale which has been taken up by feminist endeavours like the “disposable theatre” by Kankhowa.

The intensity of grotesque is manipulated in the cinematic representations of “Tejimola”. In the oral narrative, the grotesque is created by the use of words. It is true, however, that bodies in pain have an inexpressible quality to it when it comes to adequate disclosure (Elaine Scarry). In the case of cinema, the use of profound colours, their symbolic dimensions provoke meanings. Tejimola's pain has taken the visual effect of the contrast of red trickling and flowing in the white colour (of the rice flour), followed by an earthy combination of brown and green. In cinema, the stepmother's villainy is also regulated by the performance and direction. While the Assamese VCD film starring Barsha Rani Bishaya, showed the stepmother engulfed in guilt and pain after her act of torture, weeping with a hand on her chest on the death of her daughter, the recent adaptation *Kothanodi* (2015) shows the mother in a fit of schizophrenia, taken by the madness of laughter, leisurely burying the body. This minute difference has a lot to do in comprehending the effect of dismemberment on the executer herself. In the first case, the sight of broken arms, the spillage of blood sends a shock wave, furthered by a reckless escape from the event, trying to erase the body totally. The latest film, however, puts it differently, where the stepmother, in a more carnival spirit admires her exploit. This aggravates the impact of the dismantled body.

The Assamese culture portrayed in the story “Tejimola” is phallocentric in nature. There is a hierarchy in human relations, where the master-slave or dominant-submissive binary persists. The problem is evident in the lack of security faced by the stepmother in the structure of the family. In some versions, she is shown to be threatened by the overarching masculine presence of her husband, often beaten, ridiculed, undermined for being childless. Bezbaroa's children tale filters out such details. The stepmother uses the same tool of power, and revokes in a dangerous way (like in a revenge drama), harming her husband's precious Tejimola. Although the resurrected body of Tejimola is seen as uncanny and fantastical in nature, the critic Norman Brian argues, it is through speech that the posthumous woman, asserts her rights, previously denied to her (Norman, 4).

Tejimola dies multiple deaths. However, she asserts her life through elegiac songs. The beggar woman is taken aback by the words: ““stretch not thy hands nor pluck a pumpkin- thou strange beggar woman, my stepmother did crush me for the silk clothes and it is I, Tejimola”” (Datta 242). Again, she warns the cowherders saying: ““Oh, my brothers dear, cowherd boys of the village, neither stretch your hand nor pluck the fruits- return home- it is I, Tejimola who am buried here crushed to death by my stepmother”” (Datta 242). The song also reached the ears of the father, this time Tejimola yearned saying: ““Father dear, neither stretch your hands nor pluck the lily. It is I, Tejimola who was crushed to death by the stepmother only for the silk clothes”” (Datta 243). The silk cloth becomes a significant aspect of the metaphor map in the story. It turns out to be a “source”, and the body of Tejimola the “target”, the characters (beggar woman, cowherders, boatman, father) are being led to, and in fact the readers as well. But, Tejimola’s self-articulated mourning, makes her own body a metaphor (source domain), leading to the cruelty of her stepmother (target domain). Goschler says, “The difficulties increase in emotion metaphors where it is hard to decide what is source and what is target domain.” (Goschler 47).

The structural division of the story of Tejimola, extracted from the written and oral record, have enabled us to evaluate the matrix of body horror. The dismemberment metaphor highlights the female body of Tejimola, which is seen at the threshold of life and death. She is the nodal point where nuances of Assamese culture, fatal causes of murder, forms of vegetal reincarnate meet. In the variegated written versions and cinematic representations, a sort of narrative manipulation occurs, which reshapes the body of Tejimola. The equation of the narrator and the narratee keeps on changing: sometimes between the grandmother and grandchildren in storytelling methods, or teaching in a classroom situation, also in communication of characters and readers, or performers and audience on a stage/cinema, thereby making Tejimola’s dismembered body an elastic metaphor. There are layers of dismemberment which are projected in adjacent objects as well, like shredded clothes and physical distance from the frame of the house. Tejimola is “re-presented” in the story, and her death is a literary death that allows her to speak from the other end of the world, return and resume a new life, eschewing all possibilities of finality and non-being. Bezbaroa’s character has the abject quality that Julia Kristeva insists as one who “disturbs identity, system, order” (Kristeva 4), in the process of dying and resurrection. Lisa K. Perdigao’s monograph titled *From Modernist Entombment to Postmodernist Exhumation: Dead Bodies in Twentieth-Century American Fiction* (2010) discusses the difference between the modern burial/entombment of the dead body and the post-modern exhumation (excavation) of the corpse. In that line of thought, Tejimola is a sheer exhumation. She is excavated and uprooted within the textual frame, creating a grotesqueness, exquisite and aesthetic in nature. Tejimola’s body is a text in itself, with body inscriptions, loaded signification, signifying a breakage from the traditional setup of the Assamese society and nonnarratability as a woman. In correlation to the grotesque aesthetics, which “subverts our categorical expectations concerning the

natural and ontological order" (Caroll 308), the corporal in Bezbaroa's text escapes the limitations of bodily matter. Tejimola straddles the boundaries of real and hyperreal/magical and stands out as architect of her origin. Intertwined with the dismemberment metaphor(s) within the text, her body renegotiates the linear aspect of death and femininity, through its interpretative textual openings.

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## **SUBVERSION OF POST-TRUTH DISCOURSE AND DATA POLITICS IN INDIAN AGRARIAN CRISIS : KOTA NEELIMA'S *SHOES OF THE DEAD***

**Miruna George and Jaya Selvi D**

### **Abstract**

Post-truth era is characterized by infestation of alternative facts and realities that makes distinction between truth and lies obscure. It exists predominantly in the political space, where there is active engagement in exercising power over subjects. These socio-political post-truth discourses present an imperative challenge to literary world in terms of accommodating marginalised subjective realities. The task at hand is to encounter both politically motivated objective truths and alternative facts of post-truth discourses in order to assert the resilient voices of the subjects. Literary works like *Shoes of the Dead* (2013) confronts such highly fabricated, conniving post-truth discourses through its literary representation. This paper proposes to study how literary representations subvert post-truth discourses by exposing the predispositions of objective truths towards political powers. Issues of Agrarian Crisis and Farmers' suicides in India (with specific references to Central India) form the areas of study in the novel. A set of statistical data -a realm of the so-called facts- is usually presented as an evidence for its objective representation of reality; however, post-truth politics has even exploited such factual data for its advances. Literary reflections on data politics, with main focus on statistical data, as depicted in the novel, bring out the political power play involved in misrepresenting the data, and thereby, challenging its objective representation of reality. With reference to the novel, this paper aims to unravel the manipulative strategies employed by power centres in manipulating the data on farmers' suicides. This paper further argues that the misrepresented data of farmers' suicides is challenged by the novel through its literary representations and ingenious narrative techniques that subverts the post-truth discourse of Indian Agrarian Crisis.

**Keywords :** Post-Truth, Alternative Facts, Data Politics, Farmers' Suicides, Agrarian Crisis, Objective Truths and Subjective Realities.

From literary works to literary theories, from literary canons to its historical transformations, from writing to activism, the contingent of literature is exponential, yet the foundation remains the same: to represent reality from a subject point of view and thereby assert the existence of many truths. One of the

frequently discussed phenomena in literary milieu is Truth(s). Literary standpoint on the idea of truth always aims at presenting a subjective reality amidst the dominant presence of objective truth. The role of literature in representing the realities of marginalised subjects becomes highly challenging in the post-truth era. A surge of chaos than clarity, while perceiving and processing information as a result of data deluge has made literary reflections on social realities highly indispensable and significant in current times. Politically structured post-truth discourses gradually transform itself into objective *truths*<sup>1</sup> of society further undermining the subjective realities. Post-truth discourses contrive a parallel reality using alternative facts that make the distinction between truth and lie completely obscure; in addition, data politics plays a huge role in constructing these post-truth discourses which is elaborately discussed in this paper.

With the term “data politics” being widely used to denote a number of socio, techno and political phenomena, this paper deems it appropriate to specify the intended reference of the term as used in this study. In recent times, the term “data politics” refers to technological supremacy that renders power over social and even personal spaces of people. The absolute control over information about people’s social interactions, monetary transactions, movements, social and political inclinations have high implications on business, marketing, advertising and even on politics. It raises concerns on data privacy, and also shows the infinite potential of data and information; therefore, it is no wonder that the power centres of politics desperately attempt to control data to its advantage. The significance of power over data was no different even when the term “data” referred to something as finite as statistical numbers. The initial study on social, economic and political implications of data and information was centred on “statistics, demography and probability, and data production practices such as the census and administrative registers” (Bigo 1). Ian Hacking, one of the forerunners involved in the study of data, also focussed on statistics and census and how this “avalanche of printed numbers” influenced society and even history in the data revolution between 1820 and 1840<sup>2</sup> (Bigo 1). The definition of data politics has undergone tremendous changes in accordance with the technological upgrade of collecting and storing data. However, the novel *Shoes of the Dead* discusses the issue of misrepresenting the farmers’ suicide data with respect to statistical data rather than the digitalised one. Therefore, the term “data politics” used in this paper refers to the absence of intrinsic objectivity in a set of statistical data. The role of power centres involved in data fudging as portrayed in the novel is so malicious that it demands the term “data politics” be used to highlight the rhizomatic presence of political power in this issue.

Kota Neelima’s non-fictional work titled *Widows of Vidarbha: Making of Shadows* (2018) becomes a crucial part of this study as it explores the issue of farmers’ suicides backed by the author’s profound research and on-field investigation in the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra. This research work is a collection of case studies that includes life stories and interviews given by the

families of the victims. The introductory part of this non-fictional work is highly significant to this study as it blurs the boundary between fiction and facts in relation to the fictional work *Shoes of the Dead* (2013); furthermore, it validates the fictional portrayal of the issue in the novel with the factual aspects of farmers' suicide cases from Vidarbha region. In her introduction to *Widows of Vidarbha*, Kota Neelima unravels the discrepancies seen in the data of farmers' suicides as recorded by the state authorities. The author questions the disparities seen in the state's report titled, "Accidental Deaths and suicides in India" (ADSI), which is annually published by NCRB (National Crimes Record Bureau) of India (xxviii-xxx). A set of following ambiguities paves way for such production of alternative facts: the suicides of small farmers, agricultural labourers, daily wagers, who don't own a land under her/his name are not included under farmers' suicides category (xxvi); suicides of women farmers are also not included since lands are not registered under their name (xxvi); a farmer's suicide stands valid, only if she/he had loan dues with registered banks at the time of her/his suicide, and this criteria deliberately excludes the deceased victims who had taken private loans from unscrupulous moneylenders (xx). The long list of conditions to be fulfilled by the deceased in making her/his suicide valid deepens the traumatic experience of the widows in receiving their monetary compensation. These altered facts and fabricated data distort the subjective realities which the novel *Shoes of the Dead* attempts to represent. These contrived data reports can be seen as the socio-political post-truth discourse which the novel questions through its literary representations.

The novel *Shoes of the Dead* traces the intertwined lives of Keyur Kashinath and Gangiri Bhadra; Keyur is a powerful politician in Delhi and Gangiri is a poor, yet resilient, farmer from Mityala who is struggling for his survival. The political life of Keyur, a Member of Parliament comes under scrutiny because of the increasing number of farmers' suicides in his constituency, Mityala. To save himself from political turmoil, Keyur fudges the statistical data of farmers' suicides by exercising his political powers and thereby constructing a post-truth discourse. Gangiri challenges Keyur's power politics by asserting individual/subject life stories of farmers who have committed suicides as the inevitable subjective realities/truths that counter argues the post-truth discourse. Henceforth, this paper aims to explore the ways in which the novel *Shoes of the Dead* subverts socio-political post-truth discourse of Indian agrarian crisis with reference to the issue of farmers' suicides. This paper argues that the rendition of subjective realities as literary narratives, challenges politically framed objective truths pertaining to this issue. Furthermore, the novel articulates the resilient voices of the subjects using paradigm-shifting narrative techniques and inclusive communicative modes, which is also a subject of study in this paper.

In order to understand the dynamics between truth and politics, a little detour through various philosophical discussions on truth becomes important. In her work *Philosophy of Logics* (1978) Susan Haack analysed different theories of

truth – Coherence, Correspondence, Pragmatic, and Semantic– in an attempt to understand the core ideas of truth and its effects on society. Despite repeated attempts to relate truth and reality (Haack 97), profound insights into foundation of reality and its effects on truth seems to be incomplete and inadequate. It was in the works of Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, profound insights on *constructed* social reality were observed. Their work explored the varied sources of reality and dwelled into its objective and subjective aspects. The central proposition of Berger and Luckmann was that human beings interact in a social world and create a paradigm of social conventions based on experiences and belief systems. Yet again, the power relation that influences a conscious exclusion of certain subjective experiences from the constructed paradigm was not part of their discussion. At last, the most significant questions on truth and power surfaced in the writings of Michel Foucault on these areas of study. His collection of interviews *Power/ Knowledge: Selected Interviews and other Writings 1972-1977* can be seen as the foundational text to understand the politics behind truth.

In his analysis of political economy of truth, Foucault discusses the production and the establishment of politically motivated truths. His reflections on truth and politics can be seen as the earlier arguments against post-truth discourses in the academic forum. Both Foucauldian concepts and post-truth discourses involve *production* of truth and its resistance. The post-truth discourse; however, takes a detour from Foucauldian ideas in terms of its operative mechanism. In addition to production of truth, post-truth politics makes sure that *alternative facts* are also produced to confuse oppositional forces and to deactivate any forms of resistance. Rather than a hegemonic presence, a state of bewilderment among its subjects is the ultimate goal of post-truth discourses, since hegemony would anyway be the default outcome of this deceitful mechanism. In the post-truth era, the cognitive ability of the people in distinguishing truth from lies is put under test by presenting a large number of misrepresented data and alternative facts. With respect to this study, the issue of farmers' suicides and its misrepresentation attains authenticity with the manipulated data being published in ADSI by NCRB, as stated earlier. The data published by these authorities are considered to be the most reliable source of information for research institutes who are indulging in similar subjects of study and it paves way for this fudged data to become far more solid and constant. When both media and people quote and rely on these research institutes and government records to comprehend reality, these documents attain legitimacy, and that's how post-truth transforms itself into parallel realities and it further leads to hegemony. Such complex dynamics make subversion of post-truth discourses through literary representations highly challenging, yet essential.

Post-truth has become the buzzword since it was exclusively highlighted as Oxford Dictionary's word of the year in 2016; subsequently, a number of publications on the topic flooded the market and hardly any of those books failed to discuss Brexit, US elections and more importantly, the former president of USA, Donald Trump (McIntyre 2). This shows the inevitable political resonances

of the term Post-truth. The series of publications on Post-truth by Palgrave Macmillan in 2019<sup>3</sup> provided a theoretical framework to this controversial 'phenomenon' to be engaged with in a more compelling fashion in the academic space. The definitions of post-truth are as extensive and intense as its effect on society and people. For Lee McIntyre, the most striking feature is that "the idea of post-truth is not just that truth is being challenged, but that it is being challenged as a mechanism for asserting political dominance" (xiv). According to him, though there were serious challenges in the past towards the very idea of truth, "never before have such challenges been so openly embraced as a strategy for the political subordination of reality" (xiv). The features of post-truth as stated by Lee McIntyre includes, "... [Post-truth] try to bend reality to fit their opinions, rather than the other way around" (6), "... post-truth era is a challenge not just to the idea of knowing reality but to the existence of reality itself" (10). The intricate relationship between post-truth and politics is evident from his following remarks: "... post-truth amounts to a form of ideological supremacy, whereby its practitioners are trying to compel someone to believe in something whether there is good evidence for it or not. And this is a recipe for political domination" (13). Such devious acts of political oppression and subsequent marginalization of the farming community, most importantly the increasing debt-driven suicides of farmers, which is one of the most devastating aspect of Indian agrarian crisis becomes the subject of study for this paper with respect to the novel *Shoes of the Dead*.

The issue of farmers' suicides has become the discursive space for post-truth discourses. In the novel, there are two distinct spaces: a world of power politics in Delhi (a space of power) and a community of farmers from Mityala (a space of resistance). These two distinct worlds get entangled because of the news stories on farmers' suicides written and published by Nazar Prabhakar, a fearless and honest journalist working in Delhi. Nazar investigates and report on farmers' suicides, with Gangiri as his main source of information. His main aim is to expose the power politics involved in agrarian crisis which would create a positive change in the lives of farmers.

The reasons for the crisis and the problems faced by farmers in leading a peaceful and dignified life are extensive and highly complex: failed monsoons, highly priced farm inputs, deceitful moneylenders, manipulating middle-men, low yields, or high yields with less market price, inadequate policies and ineffective schemes, mounting debts, and corporate-serving politicians (Neelima 18: 2013). As signified in the title of the novel *Shoes of the Dead*, agrarian crisis is equally devastating for both the living and the dead. The families of the victims should prove the validity of their loved ones' suicide as a debt-distressed one in order to become eligible for the monetary compensation given by the state. The families of the victims, mainly widows, experience a series of emotionally disturbing investigations and exhaustive bureaucratic circumlocution in terms of paperwork and procedures. As portrayed in the novel, the state investigates the validity of each and every farmer's suicide through district suicide committees,

which meets every fortnight to vote and decide on the cases of farmers' suicides. The rise of farmers' suicides in Mityala reflects the inefficiency of Keyur Kashinath as an MP and his ruling Democratic Party. In order to curtail this, Keyur strategically falsifies the *number* of suicides recorded, instead of working on solutions to stop famers from committing suicide. Keyur monitors the activities of the district suicide committee, and influences the proceedings through his ardent supporters: local money lender Durga Das and Maha Sarpanch Lambodar (Honorary Head of all panchayats in the district). Thus, Keyur's political ambitions revolve around successful political career rather than the survival of farmers; as Nazar puts it, "There is political comfort in keeping suicide figures low. It disproves debt distress; it shows the success of policies" (16).

In the novel, the district suicide committee consists of members holding different power positions in the society: Agricultural Officer of the district Jivan Patel, Chief Medical Officer Dr. Hemant Rao, Mityala Chief of Police Purandar Reddy, Maha Sarpanch Lambodar and Maha Sarpanch Gauri Shanker, Regional Bank Manager Ramesh Vaish, deceiving money lender and powerful village leader Durga Das, the District Collector Amarendra Gul, and Satabai, a former Sarpanch representing farmers in the suicide committee. Apart from Satabai and Gauri Shanker, the rest of the committee is either corrupted or coerced to vote in favor of Lambodar and Durga Das. They (Lambodar and Durga Das) validate or invalidate a suicidal death based on their personal benefits. They both vote a suicide valid only if they are sure that the compensation money can be seized from the family later for the loan that the deceased has taken from them earlier. On the other hand, if they plan to acquire the land of the victim for the money that they have loaned earlier, they make sure that the compensation gets denied so that the family is forced to sell their land to Lambodar and Durga Das. Keyur also benefits from such deceitful acts -recording a smaller number of farmers' suicides- as it reflects his successful governance in Mityala as an MP.

One such malpractice can be witnessed when Sudhakar's suicide – a debt-distressed farmer and brother of Gangiri – is declared invalid, and therefore not eligible for monetary compensation. Such verdicts indicate the strong presence of post-truth politics in the agrarian crisis. The post-truth discourse of socio-political power can be witnessed in the following conversation, in which *talathi* (a village accountant) informed Gangiri about the verdict of the committee on his brother's suicide: "Gangiri asked again in a stunned voice, 'Are you saying *we lied?*' The talathi now squirmed a little. 'I think the committee found reasons other than the ones you mentioned for your brother's suicide'" (45). The suicide committee had quoted depression as the reason for his brother's suicide, which was also true because he was certainly depressed. But the reasons for his depression - due to mounting debts and failed harvests - are the subject realities that the post-truth discourse deliberately negates from records. This shows how the power centres (Lambodar, Durga Das and Keyur) construct an alternate reality of farmers' lives and reasons for their suicides to suppress the embedded

truths of subjective realities. In another instance, while discussing a neighbour's suicide, Gangiri's friend Vadrangi says, "The district committee had decided it was not a suicide due to debt distress. They said he died of a weak heart. In a way, that was the truth" (47). The strategic planning of Lambodhar and Durga Das involves twisting facts about the victims and creating a parallel reality. They tarnish the dignity of the victims and falsely and derogatorily label them as alcoholics who squander away money and never repay loans. They intentionally refer to trivial health issues, past family problems and victim's desire for luxurious life as reasons for suicide (13). The very fact that they had committed suicide because of increasing debt and harassment by moneylenders gets buried along with the dead. In the words of Lee McIntyre, "This [Post-Truth] is not the abandonment of facts, but a corruption of the process by which facts are credibly gathered and reliably used to shape one's beliefs about reality" (11). Such meticulously construed post-truth discourse of power centres infuriates Gangiri and he decides to challenge this power politics that destroys the life of farmers.

The field of data politics is largely encompassing in its scope and content. As mentioned earlier, considering the theme of this research paper and the novel selected for study, the definitions and interpretations on data politics are narrowed down to concepts that involves only statistical data. The dynamics of data politics gets more complex and entangled in the novel, as the novel portrays how the power of data and numbers not only threatens the life of farmers, but also misrepresents the intensity of the crisis, which may delay the proactive measures to be taken. The data being deliberately fabricated for political gains eliminates any chance for constructive measures against agrarian crisis. It is also evident in the novel through the words of Girish, an honest journalist, "Figures that make governments look bad are usually fudged" (16).

In their work titled *Data Politics: Worlds, Subjects, Rights* (2019) Didier Bigo, Engin Isin and Evelyn Rupert discuss data politics in representation:

Data sciences such as statistics, probability, and analytics have emerged not because they have merely quenched our curiosities but because these sciences have been useful for the objects and subjects they have brought into being for the purposes of governing and/or profit. And to speak constantly about data as though it either represents or records subjects and their movements, independent from the social and political struggles that govern them, is to mask such struggles (4).

As clearly pointed out here, the potential of data becoming a ground for socio-political resistance is extremely high. Gangiri's initial attempts to confront data politics and resists post-truth discourse includes him becoming a member of the suicide committee. After a lot of struggle, he finally becomes a member of the committee as a representative of the families whose members have committed suicide. He aims to alter the course of the committee's proceedings and decisions. His resistance comes in terms of disentangling the web of data politics, power and truth as seen in the course of the novel. In one of his conversations with Nazar, Gangiri discusses the repercussions created by *numbers* in the power

centred arena: "I knew I would not be able to stand for long against these powerful people who are troubled by the real numbers of the suicides, but I had to at least try" (93). Being located in a very precarious position, Gangiri still challenges the centre by exposing falsified data on farmers' suicides using every resource that he can afford, even though it endangers the lives of his brother's children. In the suicide committee meetings, Gangiri's detailed research on each and every suicide gives him victory over Lambodar and Durga Das's post-truth versions of the case.

Since post-truth discourse uses fabricated data as its main source of validity, Kota Neelima's use of investigative style of writing makes the novel resemble an investigative report on data politics in farmers' suicides. Complementing this style, the profiles of the fictional characters in the novel also revolve around profound investigation and research: Nazar Prabhakar is an investigative journalist; Videhi is the Assistant Director of Centre for Contemporary Societies whose research is on social crisis; Gangiri, a poor educated farmer whose investigations and search for *truth* provided valid proofs that made debt-distressed farmers' suicides eligible for monetary compensation. The plot of the novel moves forward through the series of reports presented by these characters. For instance, the first chapter includes Videhi and her team presenting their report on the remedial measures to be taken by the government to address agrarian crisis (7-9). The reading of her report introduces the reader to various arguments on agrarian crisis from different perspectives.

The use of articles and news stories as part of the narration makes the novel more experimental and engaging. In the fourteenth chapter of the novel, Nazar's news story on farmer suicides is presented in a typical newspaper format with title and writer's name beneath it (168-171). Such narrative technique blends journalistic style of writing - which usually carries features of report writing - with literary representations making the novel more factual than fictional. The following similarities drawn between the non-fictional work *Widows of Vidarbha* and the fictional text *Shoes of the Dead* blur the boundary between fact and fiction in the novel. One of the major factual elements seen in the novel, in comparison to *Widows of Vidarbha*, is the very structure of the suicide committee. From the case studies discussed in the non-fiction work, it can be explicitly seen that the role of bureaucrats and government officials portrayed in the novel is similar to their roles in real life as well. Furthermore, the functioning of the suicide committee and the rules that Lambodar and Durga Das uses as loopholes in deciding a suicide valid/invalid (45) are very similar to the legal requirements stated by the government for approval of monetary compensation (xxvi), yet again bringing in factuality into a fictional text. The use of case-studies and literary incarnations of real-life characters in the novel taken from her work *Widows of Vidarbha* further complements the fluidity of fact/fiction binary seen in the novel.

The use of case studies also adds to the list of combating narrative strategies employed in the novel. It is a very emotional read as it takes readers

deep into the world of struggling women whose husbands committed suicide due to debt-distress. This work stands evident to the failure of state and bureaucratic inefficiency in handling agrarian crisis with reference to farmers' suicides. The novel *Shoes of the Dead* shows a number of similarities with the case studies and life stories of the women in *Widows of Vidarbha*. For instance, one of the characters in the novel, Varadaamma, whose husband had committed suicide, claimed that she was harassed and threatened by moneylenders whose debts she was unaware of, until the suicide of her husband (223). Similarly, one of the life stories recorded in *Widows of Vidarbha* included the life story of Jayashri. She narrated a similar incident where she was oblivious to her husband's debts until his suicide. In the words of Jayashri:

After he died, the moneylenders asked me to repay the loan. I told them I had no idea about it because my husband never shared such information with me. They refused to believe me and threatened to take action. I asked them to go ahead, because I had no money to repay. (106).

Despite expressing strong resistance, Gangiri finally succumbs to power politics and commits suicide as the death of his nephew fills him with intense remorse. Even though the death of Gangiri at the end of the novel indicates a sense of uncertainty, the inclusion of his friend Vadrangi as the new member of the suicide committee asserts the continuation of protest and resistance. The emergence of Vadrangi as the new epicentre of resistance hints at the victory of subjective realities against post-truth discourses. The novel ends with Lambodar casting his vote for all suicide cases to be sanctioned monetary compensation. In the words of Vadrangi: "Just wanted to mention that Lambodhar maha sarpanch, the man notorious as apatra Lambodar, today voted for all debt suicide cases as patra or eligible for compensation" (274). The change of proceedings in the suicide committee with honest votes from Lambodhar marks the victory of both the dead and the living.

Thus, the novel represents the socio-political post-truth narrative of institutional powers that frame farmers' suicides for its own morbid and corrupt purposes through its representation of subjective realities. It presents a detailed account of farmers' suicides using investigative style of writing, which makes the entire novel resemble an investigative report. Inclusion of news story formats as part of the narration makes the text more factual than fictional. Such factual insights become highly necessary as the narration attempts to challenge the data politics involved in the reductive statistical representation of farmers' suicides. The fictionalization of case-studies from the non-fictional work *Widows of Vidarbha* becomes the most significant subject realities that the novel *Shoes of the Dead* represents to counteract the objective truths produced and generated by the state through its inaccurate data on farmers' suicides. Thus, the novel *Shoes of the Dead* represents and documents subject realities subverting the objective discourses on agrarian crisis, which in effect destabilizes the politically affiliated post-truth discourses.

### **Endnotes :**

- <sup>1</sup> It is important to note here that the phrases “objective truths,” “alternative facts” used throughout this paper refers to politically motivated and manipulated ideas and facts (realities) based on manual research and investigation. References to scientifically proven and experimentally tested *facts* are not the points of discussion here. Such scientific facts and its relation to post-truth is altogether a different, yet interesting subject of study.
- <sup>2</sup> The census taken between 1820 and 1840 (London, United Kingdom) was considered to be the first Data Revolution. It mainly focussed on the so-called “moral outsiders (deviants)”. The social categories of the census included the poor, the unmarried mother, the illegitimate child, the black, the unemployed and the disabled. It is quite obvious that the census targeted a set of people and collected data about their location, social status, employment that made significant impact on government policies and regulations. It was an anti-revolutionary attempt more than anything else. *Source: London School of Economics Impact Blog. “Big Data Problems We Face Today can be Traced to the Social Ordering Practices of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century” by Hamish Robertson and Joanne Travaglia. London 2015. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2015/10/13/ideological-inheritances-in-the-data-revolution/> May 2021.*
- <sup>3</sup> A *Political Theory of Post-Truth* by Ignas Kalpokas, *Post-Truth and Political Discourse* by David Block, *Post-Truth and the Mediation of Reality: New Conjunctures* edited by Rosemary Overell and Brett Nicholls, *Post-Truth, Scepticism and Power* by Stuart Sim.

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## **THEORIZING THE ONTOLOGY OF ‘HOME’ IN DIASPORA IMAGINATION**

**Bhagabat Nayak**

### **Abstract**

Theorizing is a process of building opinions, ideologies and hypotheses in the context of explanation, imagination and conceptualization. But in theoretical praxis ontology is the philosophical study of concepts which show how the properties of the concepts are directly related to being, becoming and understanding of concept in the subject area. Assessing the ontology of home in the understanding of theory offers the realisation of the place in its locatedness, personal knowledge, psychological necessity, and existential and imaginative practice. ‘Home’ offers space for rest, quietness, health and other requisites for living a life in happiness and for self development. The purpose of building or searching ‘home’ is a search for peace or rest that frames a formative influence on human life. ‘Home’ occupies the meaning and purpose of a ‘purer place’ where individual’s heart gets enshrined with love for its infrastructural design, conceptual dimensions and formative and nurturing influences. In diaspora imagination home becomes a metaphor and metonymy for the retrieval of individual’s past and search for solace in the romantic or nostalgic imagination. The paper is an attempt to make an analysis of ‘home’ as a living environment, identity, consolation and solace. In its analysis the paper raises some fundamental notions about home and highlights its Edenic dimension in the philosophical plasterings of the immortal marbles and mosaics of individuals’ domestic myth.

**Key words :** performative, epistemological, anxiety, sensory, affiliation.

Theorizing is a catchword that brings the collapse of functionalist approach which involves the location and its environment for analysis. It is perceived that theorizing is different from theory on the ground that theory is a process of explanation on certain principles already built but theorising is a process of building. Theorizing ‘home’ involves an understanding, redefining and interpreting the concept of home as a process of discovery, personal nature, and relationship in thinking and discussion of one’s locatedness. The concept of ‘home’ does not simply deal with the meaning of an architectural design in making or imagining rather a safe place and a comfort zone where one spiritually, ethically, morally and intellectually grows, becomes, exists and gets oxygenized with emotion, feeling and sentiment. It makes one’s ontological attachment to

members of the family, social group and wider society in solidarity and collectivity.

Home is the sheltering place of soul and a “site of the domicile” (Terkenli 327) for its pure and permanent locale. It provides almost all emotional and aesthetic primers to life when one feels repressed in his uncanny experience either nurturing narcissism of childhood or during the creeping horrors in life and consciousness. Alienation due to migration generates both physical and cultural distancing from native space, people and culture. Through the ages home has become the ‘centre’ in diaspora imagination. Home always remains a fixed point in human life.

The study of home as a physical, emotional and spiritual landscape has its origin in the great myths of the world. In Maharishi Valmiki’s *The Ramayan* Rama accepts his self exile after leaving his home and enjoys a diaspora life in forest. In his *vairagya* (detachment and renunciation) he nurtures the philosophy of home life. In Veda Vyasa’s *The Mahabharat* home becomes the cause of fraternal conflict, identity and existence. The Pandavas during their exile crave for this and after return claim the space for home from the Kauravas. In Homer’s *Illiad* Priam kidnaps Helen from Menelaus and the woman who becomes the symbol, honour and identity of a culture becomes the cause of the destruction of Troy, the home of the Greeks. During the Trojan War Odysseus had joined Agamemnon with other Greek heroes to siege Troy and to rescue Helen in *Odyssey*. His long absence had made him nostalgic for home for which he ended his epic adventure. In Virgil’s *The Aeneid* the legendary hero Aeneas, a Trojan, travels to Italy and establishes Rome as his home which was destroyed by the Greeks. In Milton’s *Paradise Lost* Adam and Eve are expelled from Home, the heaven for their First Disobedience but they fail to forget their eternal home. Every time in literary surface and poetic references the imagination of home becomes frequent in its sense of loss or displacement in unwanted way.

Home is vaguely defined or under-theorized in scholarly conventions and philosophical contexts of diaspora and expatriate studies. In subjective analysis it is a space to which individuals are involved in their belongingness and connectedness. In larger context, “The definition of home rests on a dynamic dialectical relationship between home and the outside, on which people build their everyday geographical understanding of the world” (Terkenli 328). In traditional sense home refers to the understanding of landholding, emotional connection to physical landscape and a safe place which is always “warm and positive” (Yuval-Davis 10). It is defined as the centre of culture, language and an instrument of social engineering for emotional attachment. A desire for home is enhanced by the presence of family and particularly of children. In *Samkhya* philosophy it deals with individual’s ‘whatness’ (his existence and identity) and ‘howness’ (his condition and entity of property). It is integral to individual’s family, children and social identity. In intellectual perspective it does not simply remain as a material possession or “as the safe haven, where people, especially

children, are safe" (Fitchen 316) rather functions as "a feeling which can never be completely and definitely described" (Dovey 52).

In diaspora writing 'home' is used both in intellectual dissemination and imaginative convenience while focusing retrospectively the countless phenomenons of one's life. For diasporas 'home' is the place where the 'compound and substance' of 'mind' and 'body' unite, physical constituents become casualty either after losing validity or responsibility in the science of philosophy. The concept of 'home' in diaspora imagination cannot be understood in isolation as it deals with the physical structure for primal security, adaptation of privacy, financial investment, territory, identity, a social and cultural unit, and established importance of rootedness.

Diaspora imagination articulates the concept of 'home' both in traditional way and as a philosophical category. It covers a wider category of individual's position in temporal, spatial, corporeal, epistemological and psychological manifestations. Both in physical and philosophical performance 'home' assimilates individual's 'objectivistic' and 'subjectivistic' positions in phenomenal consciousness. In the ontological study of diaspora imagination 'home' relates to individual being's becoming, his fundamental nature of existence, reality as well as the basic categories of his relations and reactions.

The ontological understanding of 'home' relates to many essential aspects of human life and subject position in diaspora and immigrant writings. The concept of 'home' in diaspora writing deals with its nature of existence and structure distinguishing its 'constitutive' and 'productive' aspects. In transnational and immigrant context 'home' emphasizes attachment to space or place of emotional and spatial connectedness. It is the place where one feels comfortable, secured and intimate in existential sense. In literary carvings 'home' is argued as a place that contributes to one's relationship with family and society in autobiographical sense, personal history, experience, relationship, memories, personal and social ties. Home remains a social, political and territorial boundary with a sort of geo-determination and imagined as a biophysical container. It is a concept of belonging that anchors one's thought, feeling, emotion and circumstances in nostalgic sense. Any connection or relation to 'home' is fluid, chaotic, rhizomatic and not worked in the multiple facades of attachment. Memory of home haunts the diaspora psyche in individual's socio-cultural, political and psychological space.

Diaspora writers have an emotional and sentimental binding with home, as it expresses their affiliation and attachment to the place with "multiple belongings" in "nostalgic exclusivity" (Walters xvi). In their ontological dimension 'home' is endorsed with psychological anxieties as a "historical cultural identity" (Ashcroft et.al. 425). It is the place of one's belonging what Wendy Walters writes:

I now see that I was searching for a location where I 'belonged', a safe intellectual and political space that I could call 'home'. But how could I

presume to find a home in a system that at best was predicted upon my alleged inferiority and, at worst, was dedicated to my removal? (xviii).

In diaspora studies:

The notion of home therefore is much more complex than approaches to diaspora premised on the power of nostalgia would us believe. It is intrinsically linked with the way in which the processes of inclusion or exclusion operate and are subjectively experienced under given circumstances. It relates to the complex political and personal struggles over the social regulation of 'belonging' (Tsagarousianou 52).

Home is not only for living but for nurturing one's emotion, feeling and sense of belongingness. It seems a life without 'home' is fragile, isolated and alienated. With the loss of nostalgia the concept of 'home' gets lost both at personal and national levels. Diaspora community live in the anxiety of 'home' both in their search for the lost geoposition, performance and choice in making. The phenomenon of home as a tangible structure gets lost with the flux of time but it gains intangible relationship between people and place in empirical research.

In diaspora theory 'home' is used as a metaphor and metonymy for peace, shelter and safety in which one's emotional and psychological data is rooted. In cultural texts and identity arguments 'home' draws attention for contributing the understanding of locations both in 'old' and 'new' nation states. Even in travel writing 'home' occupies an imaginary place of individual's conscious or unconscious state in displacement, dispossession and migration. Eminent writers of diasporic identity in Australia, America, Canada and the UK such as Longston Hughes, China Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Peter Abrahams, Derek Walcott, Aime Cesaire, Meena Alexander, Kamala Markandaya, Santa Rama Rao, V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, M.G. Vassanji, Shani Mootoo, Bharati Mukherjee, David Babydeen, Rohinton Mistry and Hanif Kureishi who configure 'home' as a cultural point and nostalgia in their writings.

The African diasporas are the communities descended from native Africans who had mass dispersion from Africa between 1500s to 1800s. The Caribbean diasporas, a sizeable well-educated and affluent demographic category have their common heritage and strong connections across the region and are located in the United States, Canada, United Kingdom and countries that were previously colonial empires. The Caribbean diasporas are a demographic composition of intra-regional migration and extra-regional migration, have strong sentimental and material links with their countries of origin or their homelands. The Indian diasporas as indentured category and qualified professionals in their superdiversity have their special image for hard work and dedication. However, while theorizing the diasporas and their condition it can be said that "Diasporas are people who want to explore the meaning of the hyphen, but perhaps not press the hyphen too far for fear that this world lead to massive communal schizophrenia" (Mishra 1).

The loss of homeland for the diasporas constantly haunt their mind and cause trauma when they are caught between the tensions of 'culture' and 'history'. In theory 'home' explains its complex, multileveled and multi-dimensional construct with specific internal unity determined by relations at different levels. Home is 'real' and 'ideal' in form and a physical, psychological and social facade. In empirical and theoretical understanding 'home' becomes a multidisciplinary hybrid approach in its necessary formulation. Home carries the meaning and purpose of privacy, identity and familiarity explicating individual's physical, psychological and social growth and emotional attachment. Home remains integral to individual's consciousness in exile, alienation and migration which cannot be erased.

Theorizing 'home' in diaspora imagination is an attempt to search for a 'locus in space' with psychological significance. In totality 'home' carries "a sense of belonging" and "rootedness" (Sixsmith 31) and refers to the 'territoriality' in one's physical search for a spiritual accommodation. In migration, displacement and dispossession the territory of home gets lost but it anchors the diaspora imagination, emotion and feeling in the hours of need for peace. It is a physical need and psychological extension during his spiritual exhaustion. Home implicitly suggests optimism and reinforces public/private analysis of the place where one hopes to retreat after finding his position in weaker sense. In psycho-spiritual sense home is the territory for security and protection, when it is described as "... a mixture of affection, reciprocated towards the home as a nurturing environment and resentment towards the demands of the home" (Darke 11). In diaspora's physical experience home establishes "intangible relationship between the people and places" in the "bounded definitions" (Dovey 52) of one's locatedness.

In their respective locatedness the diasporas think of their existential reality and comprehend 'home' as 'the centre' and 'fixed point' of their 'being' and intellectual activity. The spatial and corporeal status on the foreign land enables their intellectual activity to realise

The territory of home as a type of setting satisfies a number of social and psychological needs; home is the sole area of control for the individual; home is the most appropriate physical framework for family and family life; home is a place of self-expression; and home provides a feeling of security (Rapoport 30).

Home is a necessity for psychological health, an emotional bond and spiritual epicentre for positive thinking and doing with a quest for identity, security and stimulation. Mind occupies the space of home. In diaspora's displacement home remains as a quest for his identity. Mr. Biswas in V.S. Naipaul's *House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) narrates nearly every diaspora's existential crisis and inability to cope with the place in his search for a house. For Salman Rushdie his imagination that serves many historical and philosophical references to his novels. Similar was the case of A.K. Ramanujan whose longing for ancestral house during his thirty years of Chicago days becomes apparent in

his narrative poem "Small Scale Reflections on a Great House". In relation to family 'home' is a common site with positive aspects in "domestic power relationships" (Moore 212). In other words, home becomes "a prison and a place of terror as well as a haven or place of love..." (*ibid*) when one negates in desperation or posits in expectation. In public-private dichotomy home is economically and politically an experience of dwelling in socio-psychological consciousness.

In feminist thinking 'home' is often viewed differently. Feminists contradict the motive and purpose of 'home' with the thinking that it is a place of confinement for women. For them home is not a place for satisfaction and peace rather a prison and a place of terror as well as a haven or place of love. Home is the space full of human experiences that covers a variety of meanings from alternative perspectives. In sociological research and experience

If house and home mean the confinement of women for the sake of nourishing male projects, then feminists have good reason to reject home as a value. But it is difficult even for feminists to exorcise a positive valence to the idea of home. We often look forward to going home and invite others to make themselves at home. House and home are deeply ambivalent values (Young 749).

In many literary and poetic references 'home' has been written either in exile or when it is in danger of being lost or changed in unwanted circumstances. Homelessness causes physical and psychological impairedness and a homeless diaspora never finds a 'place of secure retreat'. In diaspora writing 'home' is assessed through the person's involuntary or forced exile for many years or in preferred homelessness. Home is an inclusive space in mind and an essential space for the identity and development of the individual. In one's historical progress 'home' is constructed but in the diaspora memory it is a lost territory revisited only in retrievals.

Feminist writers deconstruct the ideal image of 'home' that makes woman into 'less of a person' almost in captivity and isolation which makes her a person with 'mental myopia' for her drudgery of domestic work and victim of domestic violence. 'Home' for some women becomes "less of a castle, and more of a cage" (Goldsack 121). Home as a physical design of dwelling for 'body zone', and function not only becomes the place for caring body through washing, dressing, and caring but creating a domestic environment for physical and emotional nurture as well as mental recuperation. The social and cultural aspects of 'home' constitute the appropriate domestic space and physiological and psychological needs and functions. Feminist thinkers believe home a problematic social or personal space in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and Alice Walker's nonfiction *In Search of our Mother's Garden* (1983). Many writers of twentieth century think home is 'the central site of the oppression of women'. Feminist theorists like Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler consider home a feminised space. They consider home as a space for their

children and it serves as an anchor of their memory, emotion and love for family. It is

Because women were so often associated with family, home space becomes seen as a private, feminized space that is distinct from the public, masculinised space that lies outside its borders ... within this gendered sphere of private and public space, women and men assume distinctive roles. Women are expected to remain in their home "place". Avoiding the dangerous space of public streets allows women to take care for children, the sick, and the elderly, and other dependent family members. Men are expected to support and defend the private, feminized space that houses their families (Collins 67).

For women diaspora 'home' stands for "the happiness of the family group" and "meaning and value" (Beauvoir 449) of life. In the novels of Bharati Mukherjee the portrayal of home is a feminine space which the Indian women diasporas have left behind. Home remains a cultural space for women diasporas in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novels. Similarly in Jhumpa Lahiri's narrations home remains the cultural centre for which diaspora Bengali women struggle to bridge their relationship between India and the U.S. in hyphenatedness. In fact, the identity of Indian woman at home is usually determined in terms of a daughter, a wife or a home maker, and a mother. Domestic home is codified with psychological space and coherent familial relationship.

In diaspora imagination 'home' operates on several planes in cultural, domestic and gender aspects. When these aspects are in disruption or convulsion, the living place becomes like a hotel or rented room. The second and third generation diasporas from Africa and South Asia to America, Canada and Europe fail to bridge the gap between the ancestral land and the adopted one for which they struggle. While for their parents home becomes nostalgia, the new generation view it in heteroglossia. 'Home' provides a romantic nostalgia which the first generation diasporas cannot alternate or depersonalize in a new place of settlement or habitation. In diaspora narratives or travel writings

Homes become symbols of selves or cultures. Whereas the residential landscape, for example, undoubtedly conveys symbolic notions of the house ... the idea of home itself becomes a symbol of the feelings, circumstances, or types of relationships that it has come to represent in distinct epochs or cultures, such as people ... a local way of life ... a family ... or sentiments of ease, relaxation, comfort and familiarity (Terkenli 327).

In diaspora imagination home is a private and personal space bustles with intense domestic activity of warming, cooking, nurturing and interacting with inmates. In social structure home is

Formed through a combination of marital and blood time, ideal families consist of heterosexual couples that produce their own biological children. Such families have a specific authority structure, namely, a father-head earning an adequate family wage, a stay-at-home wife, and children ... held together by primary emotional bonds of love and caring (Collins 62).

The location of “Home regions are culturally constructed and geographically and culturally contingent” (Terkenli 324). This makes the diasporas a psychological category who live in the status of “Trishanku”, a middle ground between their goals or desires and current state or possessions. The location of home space gains importance as it provides material comfort, rest and security from the perils that lurks outside heel hooks. It provides the feeling of safety, warmth, comfort and feeding to nurture our bodies.

The diaspora writers of African, Asian and the Caribbean origins explicitly conceptualise home in their phenomenological and ontological perspectives either while romanticising or retrieving their memories of the past. ‘Home’ as “a site of privacy and autonomy for occupiers” (Fitchen 318) remains constant. When one is evicted or voluntarily gets displaced he analyses its attributes. The psychological concept of ‘home as a symbol of one’s self’, ‘self-identity’, ‘extension of the psyche’ and an illustration of identity one experiences in alienation. Diaspora and migrant communities imagine ‘home’ as an ‘identity shell’ while acting upon their dreams. Their ‘voluntary’ or “involuntary loss of home” (Dovey 43) make them feel the losers of personal and cultural identity, and enjoy life in an emptiness and vacuum in host land’s plenitude. Although the tendency to imagine home becomes an outcome of romantic nostalgia or neurotic heteroglossia they potentially highlight it in the facades of “psychological and sociological exploration” (Moore 207).

Diasporas in their unhappiness explicitly evaluate home environment for their sustenance, emotional protection, security and cultural representation. In analysis home is made as a cultural epitome and a cherished institution with its practical and psychological impact on the individuals. In empirical studies they realise its psychological dimension in emotional loss, alienation and dispossession. Loss of home enables one for its tangible claim in expatriation. When ‘home’ is lost either voluntarily or under compulsion it invites the dangers of wilderness for life. The understanding of home remains simply a physical structure or a unit of construction without socio-cultural connection and other additional values. Diasporas as disposed individuals always develop the somatic symptoms in distress due to their loss of homeland which evolves their “tendencies to idealise the lost place” (Duhl 151). The diasporas, expatriates, immigrants and refugees in their dislocation and migration to other locality, country or continent think, brood, reminisce and engross with the memory of home as a social, familial and psychological space. The ‘pathology’ of diaspora psychology reveals one’s long period of involvement, attachment and close association with home without which, one feels insecure and uncertain.

The paper assimilates diasporas as an ‘imaginary’ community that suffers from trauma for identity. Their love and longing for home in nostalgia serves as a metaphor of emotion and feeling in diaspora aesthetic. Diaspora writers narrate these transnational communities, their individual and philosophical dimensions in Weberian social context, Kantian ethical template and existential surrealism. The meaning and characteristics of ‘home’ is experienced ontologically in one’s

craving for it in a definite socio-cultural environment where he struggles to carve the feelings in dispossession. Home is the nurturing ground of feelings that "encompass a wide range and variety of responses" (Gurney 8) in diaspora writings. Experiencing the feelings on home is always unique that gets revealed in imagination, cultural expression and variety of responses. Through retrieving and retrospecting home in their emotions, feelings, affiliation and attachment the diaspora writers focus it as a psychological space. In their narrative parlance they experiment the concept of home in their fragmented self and homeless existence. Labouring with their fragmented self in the new location they search for a home either in settler colonies or metropolitan centres. These

.... exiles or immigrants or expatriates are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being muted into pillars of salt. But if we look back ... our physical alienation ... almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will ... create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary home lands ... of the mind (Naipaul 10).

The uncanny truth for them is that their sense of return is in devastation or denied in suppression of the fact in history, but it psychologically becomes "a symptom of the repressed truth and concerning the alienating results of private ownership" (Freud 69).

The study of diaspora grapples with the meaning of 'home' as a belonging, a nation, and an identity in the writings of diaspora writers. Both in epistemological shifts, theoretical frameworks and modes of analysis 'home' has been analysed as a cultural and philosophical production in intellectual traditions. The diasporas as "homeless wanderers, nomads, vagrants" (Said 407) inherit home as a label of identity in their "cultural insiderism" (Gilroy 3) and in "complex form of signification" (Bhabha 172). For diaspora community home may be a terminal loss but in the midst of heterogeneity, diversity and dispersement 'home' becomes a Saussurean 'sign', 'signifier' and 'signified' for their 'rootedness' and identity. 'Home' is an awareness of 'root' that the diasporas search and demonstrate from 'imaginary homelands' either in performance or perspective.

While living in host country's 'New World' the diasporas struggle to assimilate and assert the homeliness of home and try to secure their "sacred homeland" in their "out of placeness" (Naipaul 19). In the matrix of home "Nations evoke feelings of belonging" (McLeod 74). For them the concept of 'home' functions as a constant stimulant in their thinking and imagining of 'root', 'origin', shelter, stability, security and comfort. For them 'home', the land of their birth, growth, and motivation remains forever. Returning 'home' is difficult for them spatially because of their profession, aspiration and association with the people of the new world. Compromising between the love and affiliation for the new world and comprehending attachment to the root becomes the central focus of their intellectual strategy for a consolation.

To conclude, it can be said that 'home' is an extensive body of experiential phenomenon which diaspora writers encompass in wide range and variety of responses. 'Home' is an extensive body of research in literature, culture, feminist studies and social sciences where it has a complex and multi-dimensional amalgam. The formulation and surrounding of 'home' as identity has familial, cultural and nostalgic connotations within the broader concept of nation and identity. The socio-cultural facets of 'home' have the direct association with family life. Although 'home' as a 'place' and 'space' is idealized conceptually in literary, cultural and national paradigms; in legislation and judicial policy, it conveys different connotations. In pluralistic and functional approach 'home' claims more in doing with everyday living and thinking. It is the only territory that enhances memory, dream, aspiration, privacy and nostalgia for family and nation.

Home remains the centre of enlightenment where one grows intellectually with free spirits, ideologies and consciousness. In the imagination of home a diaspora remains engrossed in his past and visualises his future. Researchers, home lovers, home makers, policy makers, legal experts and social scientists agree to the view that 'home' is an "affective anchor" and "sacred connotation" (Fitchen 317) in individual's cultural moorings and 'stream of consciousness'. Although the migrant and diaspora professionals work on fat packages in different sectors at distant places they romanticise their homelands and 'home' as the Edenic world of their imagination.

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# **MASQUERADING GELOTOPHOBIA THROUGH SELF-EVASIVE LAUGHTER : EXPLORING THE LINK BETWEEN THE RIDICULOUS BANGAL IN SELECT POPULAR BENGALI CINEMA OF THE 60S AND HIS GHOTI BHADRALOK AND BANGAL REFUGEE VIEWER IN THE ENTRENOUS(?) OF THE MOVIE HALL**

**Ashes Gupta**

## **Abstract**

This is an attempt at tracing the negative stereotyping of the abominable Bangal in popular Bengali Cinema of the 60s through a sequence of factors/ events that include the Bengali refugee's (the Bangal's) exodus from erstwhile East Pakistan now Bangladesh in the post-partition timeframe, resultant erosion of cultural space perceived by the Ghoti Bhadralok (the original inhabitants of West Bengal and esp. Kolkata) and his tension, shame-bound anxiety and pathological fear of being laughed at (attributable to his deep seeded gelotophobia) by the rootless yet gritty refugees. Through a largely subjective reading and theorising, I propose to view this strategy of ridicule induced portrayal of the Bangal and resultant laughter as a reversal that is essentially self-evasive in nature. This paradigm intriguingly and interestingly encodes racial and communal undertones/ implications in the portrayal of the Bangal characters that serve to trigger the desired response of laughter. A case in point is the manner in which Bhanu Bandopadhyay has always been portrayed as the East Bengali - the Bangal in films like 'Share Chuattor', 'Ora Thake Odhare' et al. Such negative stereotyping and derogatory cultural codification rampant in popular Bengali cinema of the 60s obviously exposes the tension of the Ghoti Bhadralok who feels helpless at the proliferation of refugee colonies of Jadavpur and Shodpur in his home turf Kolkata, the obnoxious distortion of his 'standard literary Bangla Bhasa', the stink of gastronomical stigmas such as 'shutkey' (the disgusting dryfish) wafting in the air and to top it all, the rise of the Bangal intellectual (ref. 'Bangalnaama' by Tapan Roy Choudhury) and the emergence of the working Bangal women (ref. Hritwik Ghatak's 'Meghe Dhaka Tara'). Hence, for the Ghoti Bhadralok, the only means of countering and playing down this tension of erosion of cultural space due to an almost reverse colonization by a sea of rootless, homeless migrants was to negatively stereotype and laugh at the wretched lot of refugee Bangals who just refused to die in spite of their temporary relocation at Sealdah platform and 'settlement' at Dandakaranya,

Marichjhapi and Andaman. This reading initiates a subversive perspective, thus unmasking the Ghoti Bhadralok viewer who masquerades himself as the privileged and the superior, both culturally and politically (but is internally gelotophobic), while at the same time being aware of a gnawing reality of disposition. The result has been a very caustic and self-evasive laughter.

**Keywords :** Masquerading, gelotophobia, Bangal, refugee, Ghoti Bhadralok, negative stereotyping, gastronomical stigma, self-evasive laughter.

*'Laughter is a more social phenomenon, and it occurs for reasons other than humor, including unpleasant ones.'*

-Giovantonio Forabosco<sup>1</sup> (*qtd. in Sabato*)

*'[L]aughter allows the audience to become aware of itself.'*

- André Bazin '*Theatre and Cinema*'

An apparently uncompromising code of conduct and a certain self-induced seriousness have always been the hallmark of the Bhadralok Ghoti<sup>2</sup> inhabiting Kolkata. Equipped with often passable knowledge of litterateurs and cultural stalwarts as well as spiritualists from Bengal (generally from West Bengal), he has always been fond of basking in their glory substantiated by frequent names-dropping. Tagore<sup>3</sup> or Bankim Chandra<sup>4</sup>, Ramakrishna<sup>5</sup> or Aurobindo's<sup>6</sup> works might not have been read, but the Ghoti Bhadralok of West Bengal (esp. Kolkata) believed that they were all great and hence unquestionable in their Bangaliana<sup>7</sup>. There was also very often a deep seeded feeling that as torchbearers of 'proper' Bengali identity, unquestionable in all its cultural ramifications, they were entrusted with the sacred duty of upholding and safeguarding it from all philistine invasions, not only from the Oriyas<sup>8</sup>, Biharis<sup>9</sup> and Marwaris<sup>10</sup> (a term homogenously and erroneously applied by them for all inhabitants of Rajasthan), but also from their 'lesser' Bengali counterparts- the Bangal<sup>11</sup>, abominable, gawky and uncouth in his disposition. This sense was as much a notion of territorial preservation as it was cultural. Tracing his origin from colonial clerkship (the Babu of British administration), through the negotiable and convenient Nehruvian socialism<sup>12</sup> of immediate post-independence India, to the fashionable and mutated Leftism of the 60s, the Bhadralok Ghoti had reasons for his complacency, for his was a more or less undisturbed existence. Kolkata as a city-space provided him with a sense of perennial security and next to impossible dislocation/relocation. The city with its architectural and human wonders had allowed him over the centuries to strike his roots and spread his tentacles within its domicile. A considerable Western education coupled with the halo of Bengal Renaissance<sup>13</sup> further solidified his claims to progressiveness and World enfranchisement. Occasionally ruffled by a Sepoy Mutiny<sup>14</sup> or a Banga-Bhanga<sup>15</sup>, his existence was never threatened by outsiders moving in to work in Kolkata

from miffasils and putting up temporarily in meager messes immortalized by Shibram Chakraborty (Muktarambabur Mess)<sup>16</sup>. Saratbabur *Choritrahin*<sup>17</sup> was enough to create a ripple in his otherwise unperturbed life whose center of gravity was well maintained by Robibabur Gaan<sup>18</sup> and Bankimbabur Upanyas<sup>19</sup>. But ironically this was to be short lived post-partition.

And in keeping up to this code of conduct that was the essence of the Ghoti Bhadralok's existence, encoding his genteelness, this class believed in a certain apparent restraint and control, balance and sobriety that was the epitome of their cultural disposition by and large. Hence to laugh at their own folly was unimaginable, almost blasphemous. The result was often a cultivated sophist façade under whose dark shadows lurked the insecurity of being ridiculed and laughed at by others who would read beneath this apparent (pseudo) serious and suave exterior and discover traces of endemic anxiety. This amounted to a chronic gelotophobia<sup>20</sup> in the Ghoti Bhadralok class and an urgency to masquerade this with an immediately reverse act of negative codification of the 'Other' evoking ridicule and laughter. Strategically self-evasive at the core, this was an attempt to shift the gaze of the 'Other', whose cultural and territorial expansion created anxiety among the Ghoti Bhadralok entailing the risk of humiliation, of being made fun of, of evoking laughter in reality at his loss. However, it has to be remembered that this dichotomy and resultant threat perception have a long history and manifest themselves in a plethora of cultural phenomenon like the iconic rivalry between the football giants East Bengal and Mohun Bagan<sup>21</sup> of Kolkata. Dating back to the inception of the former in 1920 (while the latter was founded much earlier in 1889), this rivalry had varied cultural and literary ramifications and had been fuelled by post partition refugee influx, when the homeless migrants from Bangladesh (erstwhile East Bengal) identified themselves with it and its fortunes on the football ground, triggering mass hysteria. Similarly Narayan Ganguly's iconic *Tenida Series*<sup>22</sup> with its humorous take on the Dada culture of Bengal (more specifically Kolkata) complete with Tenida's often dominant yet laughable highhandedness, the almost nationalistic sense of belonging to the 'para' (literally meaning neighbourhood) of Patoldanga<sup>23</sup> with the zeal for territorial preservation, its celebration of the 'roker adda'<sup>24</sup>, cannot yet conceal the same ridicule with which Habul Sen<sup>25</sup> (often addressed as the Bangal) is being portrayed. This and many other such phenomenon provided a historical context encompassing almost half a century to this post-partition paradigm of the ridiculous and abominable Bangal being negatively codified and laughed at, that this paper intends to highlight.

Cinema as a modern art form combines a peculiar blend of staticity (in terms of filming, post-production and projection in a post-performance timeframe as well as a delayed audience response, unlike theatre) and dynamicity (it's a movie with progression in frames unlike photograph or painting) and offers itself as the right choice for analysing the filmmaker's embedded intentions, ideologies, racist and communal motives at work as well as the audience's ephemeral and non-verbal reactions and responses (such as laughter) that expose

social, cultural and racist biases at play. But it is essential to remember here that the audience is not one uniform homogenous demographic entity, rather it is a pluralistic and heterogeneous mass with varied backgrounds and perspectives. Hence to comprehend the gelotophobia of the Ghoti Bhadralok viewer that remains concealed under his self evasive laughter, targeted at the ridiculous Bangal refugee character in popular Bengali films of the 60s mentioned earlier, it becomes essential to not only critique the film and its audience, but also the very construct of the cinema hall as a public space. Andre Bazin writes, “[L]aughter allows the audience to become aware of itself” (Bazin 121).

It becomes pertinent to differ from Bazin here in the context of the Bangal viewer whose “becoming aware of himself” in a situation of cinema induced laughter might not in all probability be such an immediate possibility. Taking into account my own experience (as a Bangal belonging to a refugee family that had migrated to Tripura in North East India post partition) of viewing the films under scrutiny at a younger age, amidst a heterogeneous audience in Kolkata, I can safely infer that I had no qualms in joining in the collective laughter along with my Ghoti Bhadralok counterparts, since at that point of time the entertainment/pleasure function of cinema for me was prioritized as opposed to the critique function. As I situate myself in the context of the movie hall ‘then’ (as against the ‘now’ of my post-viewing), I realize that ‘awareness’, as Bazin terms it, for me was not operational ‘then’ and is only a development ‘now’. Therefore this collective and shared laughter on racist stereotyping, presented in all its naïveté in these films, enabled the Bangal viewer and his Ghoti Bhadralok counterpart to elevate themselves to an ‘entre nous’<sup>26</sup>, a public space as Charles Taylor would say, where the information that this is humorous and laughable was common awareness, but ‘then’ it certainly did not make me aware that this racist humour was targeted towards the likes of me. This further leads to the premise that awareness itself is a multilayered construct. My position as an uncritical and ‘unaware’ viewer fits into Julian Haniche’s proposition of the collective public expression function of laughter as instrumental in making the audience ‘aware’ of itself as a social group with common emotional response inhabiting the public space of the movie hall. But what about a Bangal Refugee viewer who, unlike me, at the very first instance of viewing these films, refuses and resists laughter, realizing that he is the target of these racist darts? For him and many others like him, the collective awareness function of laughter and the construction of public space in terms of Charles Taylor’s *entre nous*, based on a simplistic homogenization of the racial plurality of the audience in a movie hall get subverted and replaced by divided awarenesses. This paper is a consequence of a similar awareness, delayed of course, that derives from the critical faculty and critique function in the Bangal refugee viewer and is in sync with Haniche’s “difference in sameness”, a position that can only be achieved through an aware and analytic counter viewing or viewing as resistance<sup>27</sup>.

The praxis of this paper strangely necessitates reference to Ritwik Ghatak’s *Meghe Dhaka Tara*<sup>28</sup> that indulges in a melancholy of loss and the all consuming

struggle for survival delineating the fate of a dusky Bangal refugee girl (difficult to be labeled as heroine due to the lack of conventional glamour that this term denotes) and a migrant family. Far removed from laughter and humour (except might be for that insane variety which is the prototype of extreme sorrow when expressions of sadness and joy swap positions with each other), it induces everything else but laughter. Yet, strangely enough, this girl whose only desire was to live as she proclaims in the cult line from the movie, has a lot in common with the character that Bhanu Bandopadhyay<sup>29</sup> portrays in *Sharey Chuattor*<sup>30</sup> or for that reason *Ora Thake Odhare*<sup>31</sup>, where the ace comedian of Bengali popular cinema inspires laughter with his mimicking of the Bangal. To begin with both belong to refugee families- the abominable Bangal, whose post-partition exodus to West Bengal from erstwhile East Pakistan now Bangladesh had completely altered the demographic profile of this culturally vibrant Indian state proud of its own traditional heritage and cultural legacy making an indelible and corrosive dent in the Ghoti Bhadralok's domain. In the entre nous of the movie hall the viewers drool over the inescapable tragedy of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, and explode into collective laughter (as was my case 'then') titillated by the humour of *Sharey Chuattor* or *Ora Thake Odhare*, all at the expense of the Bangal. But how do we reconcile these apparently paradoxical positions portrayed by this cinematic binary? This automatically entails a theoretical interjection. The proposition of this paper is that the laughter evoked by Bhanu Bandopadhyay's humour in the latter films in reality acts as a cover up for a greater tragedy, of laughing as a counter to the impending threats to cultural superiority, shrinkage of cultural space and adulteration of a conceived purity of language and gastronomy to which the helpless gelotophobic Ghoti Bhadralok is subjected to as a consequence of the post partition refugee influx. At this juncture it is also relevant to point out that the Bangal refugee's laughter at his own expense in the entre nous of the movie hall could be explained in terms of reverse gelotophobia exhibited by him. It is intriguing to note however, how the racial and communal undertones/ implications in the portrayal of certain characters in films et al. serve to trigger the desired response of laughter. Haniche's 'control function of laughter'<sup>32</sup> applies to the way in which mainstream Bengali movies like the ones in question, legitimised the negative stereotyping of the refugee Bangal in the entre nous of the movie hall thus created. The very act of reflection got temporarily suspended in this entre nous as it happened with me 'then'. It is only in the post-filmatic time frame- the 'now', that I despise myself for having participated in the collective laughter of the entre nous. And in conformity with Simon Critchley, I validate the awareness that, "Humour can provide information about oneself that one would rather not have" (Critchley 74). This is surely embarrassing and leads to a scrutiny of the phenomenon of laughter.

The laughter of the Ghoti Bhadralok viewer in the entre nous of the movie hall may be interpreted in terms of Freudian Release Theory as a release of pent-up nervous energy. This further falls in place with the evolutionary explanation of humor as proposed by Matthew M. Hurley. Hurley's idea revolves around oppositionality. "Humor is related to some kind of mistake. Every pun, joke and

comic incident seemed to contain a fool of some sort—the ‘butt’ of the joke” (qtd. in Sabato). According to him, the typical response to this is enjoyment of the idiocy. But he also adds that it “makes sense when it is your enemy or your competition that is somehow failing but not when it is yourself or your loved ones.” (qtd. in Sabato). This adequately explains the gelotophobic Ghoti Bhadralok viewer’s predicament of desperately clinging to a virtual superiority and infallibility on screen while in reality he was losing his foothold in his own home turf Kolkata. A common view of laughter across different cultures and societies is that it perpetuates negative stereotypes. Laughter is directed at those who are considered inferior and in itself is an expression of triumph and superiority. Deflation of the target and enhancement of the morale of those who tell/crack the joke is the aim with which laughter functions in a socio-cultural context. Again in such a milieu, laughter appears to take oppositional positions, it serves as a weapon of ridicule and banter that the socially, economically and culturally privileged flexes against the underdog no doubt, but it can also operate as a subversive tool for the subaltern whose caustic and acidic humour and laughter aims at debunking the so called sophisticated and scandalous aristocrats as in Jeleparar Shong<sup>33</sup> of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Kolkata. Laughter in such a case empowers the plebian ‘chotolok’<sup>34</sup> to deflate the social hegemony. Hence, across ethnic lines laughter has also been considered as a form of aggression, especially when used by the oppressed.

But the strange case of humor provoking laughter at the expense (?) of the Bangal in popular Bengali cinema of the 60s and 70s, presents a different story all together. In order to comprehend this paradigm in all its complexity, it is essential to locate Kolkata in West Bengal as a space that enjoyed certain socio-economic and cultural privileges vis-à-vis the rest of Eastern India of the times. The supremacy enjoyed by Kolkata as the centre of Bengali culture resulted in a centralisation of cultural power and resources. Kolkata was also privileged to be the economic centre of Eastern India towards which there was a continuous flow of human capital in search of livelihood right from the colonial times. The ideology of standardisation as a result promoted the superiority of the Ghoti (the original inhabitant of West Bengal) over not only the Bangal- the refugee, but primarily over all types of migrants. Such was the attraction of Kolkata that people from Bihar and Orissa for instance flocked to the city in search of fortune and were negatively codified as ‘Bhojpuri’, ‘Khotta’ or ‘Paschima’ (the perpetual doorman) and Ure (the perpetual cook or servant) respectively. They were the ‘other’ who ended up as the butt of ridicule with their habitual dressing pattern, their accented Bengali and their eccentricities all marking them in sharp contrast to that which was Bengali (Ghoti), the ‘bhadralok’ and hence the standard. In fact, comic illustrations of such alienated plebians trying to survive in the hostile urban space inhabited by a condescending populace, populate the texts of *Handa Bhonda*, *Nonte Phonte*<sup>35</sup> et al. and serve to provoke laughter. But in the case of the Bihari and the Oriya, there was no threat perception at the cultural front for the Ghoti. The serenity of the latter’s’ sedentary life ruffled by regular adda on his ‘parar roke’ and an occasional Mohun Bagan vs East Bengal football match, was

largely undisturbed. While for the lesser mortals of this race there was always ‘Gorer mathe hawa khaowa’<sup>36</sup>, for the higher ups there was the option of ‘hawa badol’ or going for a ‘change’ to Deoghar, Joshidi, Hazaribag and Giridih <sup>37</sup>. The curious coinage of the term ‘Changer’ attributable of the imitable carriage of the Bengali (read Ghoti) tourist complete with his signature muffler and monkey cap triggers immediate visualization and is a part of film iconography.

However, this copy book reality was in for a strong jolt during the partition of India. The exodus had begun:

Such a long way ahead-

A boat to the steamer ghat

From there to the railway station-

What fun! This is going to be your first ride on train

The train will take us to the Check Post

From there you will walk, walk and walk-‘

‘Walk where Baba?’ The small boy, his eyes still fresh from sleep asked in wonder.

‘Where else? Our own country!’

(an excerpt from ‘Udbaastu’ by Achintyo Kumar Sengupta quoted in Sengupta, Jayita 31)

One can imagine the irony of the lines that speak of a naïve expectation only to be frustrated in reality on this side of the border. The huge human tide of homeless people forced to migrate to West Bengal disrupted not only the economic stability but also Bengal’s cultural stability. Sealdah<sup>38</sup> station platforms were flooded with famished faces, streets of Kolkata turned into an ever surging sea of skeletal hands begging and wailing for rice bran, families used to decades of prosperity and well being suddenly found themselves in refugee ghettos that were relief camps (in some cases Permanent Liability Camps) only in name. The valour and vigour of the Bengali freedom fighters were repaid with a stigma-refugee- the Bangal. The Green Revolution<sup>39</sup> never reached Bengal’s shore.

A refugee in the context of this paper is a victim of the partition of Eastern India/undivided Bengal, one who has ironically left behind the real, but has carried on forever indelibly imprinted in memory that which is lost and remembered in superlatives, thus moving and simultaneously resisting to move. This peculiar paradoxicality of existence is also the cause of much trauma, the trauma that I am referring to here is not the physical violence and atrocities inflicted on him alone, but more than that the trauma of being uprooted from ‘one’s land’ one fine morning due to a political decision taken by those whose lives remained unaffected by the futility of the same decision. The field of green corn swaying in the wind ready to be harvested by someone else’s sickle, one’s

own home that suddenly becomes a house, one's land of birth transformed to a land not for him from which one has to move to a land that has been decided upon to be his, account for atrocities far more severe. Hence when he moved to West Bengal he already stood cornered, with his back to the wall and nowhere to recede further. The 'earnest' efforts of 'sympathetic' governments to rehabilitate him resulted in relocation to Andaman and Nicobar islands infested with unfriendly tribes or to survive against the black fever and malaria of Dandakaranya<sup>40</sup> and Marichjhapi<sup>41</sup>. But survive he did and by sheer grit he transformed the saline landscape of Radhanagar Island in Andaman to a typical Bengal 'palli'<sup>42</sup> landscape, a replication that reflects the idyllic and iconic "Rupasi Bangla" of Jibannanda Das with its model embedded deep in the refugee psyche:

Go where you will – I shall remain forever on Bengal's shore,  
 Shall see jackfruit leaves dropping in the dawn's breeze,  
 And the brown wings of shallik<sup>43</sup> chill in the evening,  
 Its yellow leg under the white, going down dancing.....

(an excerpt from 'Rupashi Bangla' by Jibannanda Das  
 quoted in Dasgupta & Bagchi, 197-6).

With the entire world conspiring against him, the Bangal refugee simply refused to die and with his uncouth ways and means started spreading his tentacles in Kolkata much to the dismay of the Ghoti.

The post independence partition trauma of Bengal saw a gradual transformation of the Bengali (read Ghoti) Bhadralok's cultural space in Kolkata. The proliferation of refugee colonies of Jadavpur and Shodpur in his home turf Kolkata, the obnoxious distortion of his 'standard literary Bangla Bhasa', the stink of gastronomical stigmas such as 'shutkey' (the abominable dryfish) wafting in the air, the sprawling refugee markets at Hatibagan and to top it all the rise of the Bangal intellectual (ref. *Bangalnaama* by Tapan Roy Choudhury) and the emergence of the working Bangal women (ref. Hritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara*) sent jitters down the Ghoti spine. The sedentary days of the roke, the petty intrigues of the indolent urban space, the 'Shukhi grihakon shobhe gramophone'<sup>44</sup> picture book middle class domesticity and the complacency of a life well lived went for a bouncer. A Bangal with a deep baritone by the name of George Biswas<sup>45</sup> changed the musicscape of the effeminate Robi Babur gaan. Fights for possession of encroached land by the refugees in the colonies in and around Kolkata saw the rise of the Left. IPTA<sup>46</sup> was founded and along with it the concept of mass culture for mass consumption. The picture of elegantly dressed girls getting down from a family Morris Minor<sup>45</sup> to attend college competed with that of a dusky Bangal girl of the colonies in a cotton saree and a pair of slippers jostling for space in the local bus, Ritwik Ghatak's 'Meghe Dhaka Tara' was born.

The 'culturally superior' Ghoti was thus subjected to a threat perception of shrinkage of cultural space in his own home turf Kolkata. He therefore resorted

to comic stereotyping as well as negative and derogatory cultural codification of the 'less cultured' Bangal in popular cinema, making him the butt of humour and ridicule. This trend rampant in popular Bengali cinema of the 60s and 70s such as *Share Chuattor* and *Ora Thake Odhare* coincided with the post-partition trauma of the Ghoti Bhadralok - the original inhabitant of West Bengal, for whom the only means of countering and playing down this trauma and tension due to erosion of cultural space and territorial sovereignty caused by the almost reverse colonization by a sea of rootless, homeless migrants was to negatively stereotype and laugh at this wretched lot of refugees who just refused to die in spite of their immediate relocation at Sealdah platform and 'settlement' at Dandakaranya, Marichjhapi and Andaman. Laughter thus directed at the onscreen Bangal comedian (representing the inferior) provided a sense of superiority (virtual albeit) and an expression of triumph to the Ghoti Bhadralok class, leading to a deflation of the target. This enhanced the morale of the Ghoti Bhadralok who laughed out of an apparent superiority, but was ironically also threatened. Hence the laughter targeted at Bhanu Bandopadhyay in his inimitable aping of the Bangal in an otherwise predominantly Ghoti environs of screen space was an expression of desperation and was very caustic indeed, the result of the Ghoti Bhadralok's deeply embedded and endemic gelotophobia. And for me, the collective awareness function of laughter that had resulted in the entre nous of the movie hall then, now leads to a feeling of being excluded from the laughing community. I comprehend, though late, the social and cultural distance between 'us' and 'them' and between critique and enjoyment and also become aware of the unacceptability of such laughter that pivots around negative codification and racial stereotyping. This strategy of counter viewing or viewing as resistance that derives from a certain reflexivity<sup>46</sup> in turn explains the relation between the Bangal character on screen and his gelotophobic Ghoti Bhadralok viewer inhabiting the entre nous of the movie theatre as well as his counterpart the Bangal refugee viewer populating an audience that is essentially heterogeneous.

### Notes :

- <sup>1</sup> A psychologist and an editor at an Italian journal devoted to studies of humor (*Rivista Italiana di Studi sull'Umorismo*, or *RISU*)
- <sup>2</sup> The proclaimed original inhabitant of Kolkata and West Bengal. Bhadralok (Bengali: ভুদ্রলোক *bhôdrôlok*, literally 'gentleman', 'well-mannered person') is Bengali for the new class of 'gentlefolk' who arose during British rule in India (approximately 1757 to 1947) in Bengal region in the eastern part of the Indian subcontinent. Most, though not all, members of the Bhadralok class are upper caste, mainly Baidyas, Brahmins, Kayasthas, and later Mahishyas. There is no precise translation of Bhadralok in English, since it attributes economic and class privilege on to caste ascendancy. The two biggest factors that led to the rise of the Bhadralok were the huge fortunes many merchant houses made from aiding the English East India Company's trade up the Ganga valley, and Western-style education (at the hands of the colonial rulers and of missionaries). The steep rise in

real estate prices in Calcutta also led some petty landlords in the area to become wealthy overnight. The first identifiable Bhadralok figure is undoubtedly Ram Mohan Roy, who bridged the gap between the Persianised nobility of the Sultanate era in Bengal and the new, Western-educated, nouveau riche comprador class.

- 3 Variously hailed as Gurudev, Kobiguru, Biswakobi, Robindronath Thakur (7 May 1861 – 7 August 1941) was a versatile genius- Bengali poet, writer, composer, philosopher and painter. He reshaped Bengali literature and music, as well as Indian art and was the first non-European as well as the first lyricist to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913
- 4 Born on 26<sup>th</sup> June 1838, he was a novelist, poet, journalist and administrator. Chattopadhyay wrote thirteen novels and many serious, serio-comic, satirical, scientific and critical treatises in Bengali. He was the composer of *Vande Mataram*, originally in Sanskrit. He passed away on 8<sup>th</sup> April 1894.
- 5 Was a Hindu mystic, saint, and religious leader of 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal who experienced spiritual ecstasies from a young age, and was influenced by several religious traditions, including Tantra, Bhakti and Advaita Vedanta. As a devotee of Goddess Kali and priest at the Dakshineswar Kali Temple, his mystical temperament and ecstasies gained him disciples whom he eventually taught and who would later form the monastic Ramakrishna Order. His sayings have been compiled in *Ramakrishna Kathamrita*. He was born on 18<sup>th</sup> February 1836 and passed away on 16<sup>th</sup> August 1886.
- 6 Born Aurobindo Ghose (15 August 1872 – 5 December 1950) was an Indian philosopher, yogi, guru, poet, and nationalist. As an influential leader of Indian freedom struggle from British rule, he was convicted in the Alipore Bomb Case of 1908 and served a prison sentence but then became a spiritual reformer, introducing his visions on human progress and spiritual evolution.
- 7 The essence of being a Bengali in all aspects of living and culture, often used in an exclusivist sense to encompass all that roughly constitutes Bengaliness, might even border on parochialism.
- 8 Colloquial Bengali word for inhabitants of Orissa.
- 9 Colloquial Bengali word for inhabitants of Bihar.
- 10 An erroneously generalized term. Marwar is a province in Rajasthan and its inhabitants are the Marwaris, but in Bengali diaspora anyone who hails from any part of Rajasthan is termed a Marwari.
- 11 Inhabitants of erstwhile East Pakistan now Bangladesh who migrated to India post partition and during the Bangladesh Liberation War (পুত্তি যুদ্ধ) of 1971 and were dubbed as refugees (Bengali ‘উদ্বাস্ত’).
- 12 Socialism in India is a political movement founded early in the 20th century, as a part of the broader Indian independence movement against the colonial British Raj. Under Nehru, the Indian National Congress adopted socialism as an ideology for socio-economic policies in 1936.
- 13 Refers largely to the social, cultural, psychological, and intellectual changes in Bengal during the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, as a result of

contact between certain sympathetic British officials and missionaries on the one hand, and the Hindu intelligentsia on the other. Centered in Kolkata (Calcutta) and led by Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833), Bengal Renaissance reached its zenith in the hands of Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941).

- <sup>14</sup> Also called the First Indian War of Independence, it was a widespread but unsuccessful rebellion against British rule in India in 1857–59.
- <sup>15</sup> The division of Bengal carried out by Lord Curzon, the British viceroy in India, despite strong Indian nationalist opposition. This initiated a transformation of the Indian National Congress from a middle-class pressure group to a nationwide party capable of mass movement.
- <sup>16</sup> Was a popular Bengali writer, humorist and revolutionary whose humorous short stories and novels are renowned for their unique use of pun, alliteration, play of words and ironic humour. He spent most of his life (1903–1980) in a second-floor rented accommodation or mess, consisting only of a bedstead & bedsheets at Muktaram Babu Street in Kolkata. He turned its walls into a hand-written calendar, documenting his time there.
- <sup>17</sup> A novel by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, the popular Bengali novelist.
- <sup>18</sup> Later came to be known as Rabindra Sangeet- the songs of Rabindranath Tagore.
- <sup>19</sup> Novels written by the famous Bengali novelist Bankim Chandra Chatterjee
- <sup>20</sup> The fear of being laughed at, *gelotophobia* may be considered as a specific variant of shame-bound anxiety. It is defined as the pathological *fear of being* an object of laughter.
- <sup>21</sup> Legendary football clubs of Kolkata whose rivalry is well known, the former had the rare distinction of being the first Indian team to defeat a European team, the East Yorkshire Regiment, 2-1 to lift the 1911 IFA Shield.
- <sup>22</sup> The pet name of Bhajahari Mukhujje (Bhajahari Mukherjee), an endearing character created by Narayan Ganguly (4 February 1918 – 8 November 1970), an Indian novelist, poet, essayist, and short story writer, who wrote in Bengali. Tenida is a fictional native of Potoldanga in Calcutta. In spite of his lackluster academic career Tenida was admired and respected by the other three lads of his group for his presence of mind, courage, and honesty as well as his vociferous appetite.
- <sup>23</sup> A locality in Kolkata.
- <sup>24</sup> An extended concrete platform jutting out of the house by the side of the road meant for sitting in a neighbourhood and the usual place for idling away (Adda being a Bengali word for casual meeting for discussing everything under the sun, from the sublime to the profane).
- <sup>25</sup> A character of Bangal descent in Narayan Ganguly's Tenida stories.
- <sup>26</sup> Charles Taylor uses this French term to denote a common awareness, a common vantage point, a public space, something that is for 'us'.
- <sup>27</sup> A term coined by the researcher to denote a conscious and critical viewing (in contrast to the pleasure and entertainment function of viewing. This is borrowed from reading as resistance.

- <sup>28</sup> A 1960 film written and directed by Ritwik Ghatak (Bengali: মেঘ ঢাকা তারা, *Mēghē Dhākā Tārā*, meaning *The Cloud-Capped Star*) is based on a novel by Shaktipada Rajguru with the same title and is a part of the trilogy, *Meghe Dhaka Tara*(1960), *Komal Gandhar* (1961), and *Subar -narekha* (1962), all dealing with the aftermath of the Partition of Bengal during the Partition of India in 1947 and the refugees coping with it.
- <sup>29</sup> Real name Samyamoy Bandyopadhyay (26 August 1920 – 4 March 1983) was an Indian actor, known for his work in Bengali cinema. He acted in over 300 movies, in numerous plays and performed frequently on the radio. His signature comic style was a parody of the Bangal.
- <sup>30</sup> (Bengali: সাত্তে চূয়াওৱ; English: Seventy Four and Half ) is a 1953 Bengali comedy film, directed by Nirmal Dey, story by Bijon Bhattacharya, starring Tulsi Chakrabarti and Molina Devi, and co-starring Suchitra Sen and Uttam Kumar with comedians Bhanu and Jahar. Contemporary playback singers like Dhananjay, Dwijen Mukherjee, Shamol Mitra and Manabendra Mukherjee acted in this film.
- <sup>31</sup> *They Live on the Other Side* is a Bengali romantic comedy film directed by Sukumar Dasgupta based on a story by Premendra Mitra. The plot revolves with the disputes between contemporary Ghoti and Bangal families. Finally their fight leads to a love affair between two protagonists.
- <sup>32</sup> Julian Hanich quotes Walter Benjamin and says if and only if audience reactions become public others can control and judge them as ‘misguided or even ethically problematic’.
- <sup>33</sup> Live pantomime actors who during the Charak festival or other religious festivities went round the city of Kolkata lampooning and ridiculing the Bhadralok Babus, the civic authorities and the religious hypocrites. Jelepara (the fishermens' quarters in the then Kolkata) as the name suggests was famous for its participation.
- <sup>34</sup> The lower class and castes also known as the ‘Itarjan’ (the vulgar masses) who aspired to establish a counter culture of the bawdy and the ribald.
- <sup>35</sup> Bengali popular comic strips by writer-illustrator Narayan Debnath published by Deb Sahitya Kutir, Kolkata.
- <sup>36</sup> The English translation would approximate to strolling on the Kolkata Maidan for a puff of fresh air.
- <sup>37</sup> Places in Bihar and Jharkhand today that were famed to be restorative and healthy and were the frequent haunts of Bengali tourists from West Bengal, esp. Kolkata.
- <sup>38</sup> A railway station in Kolkata.
- <sup>39</sup> Generally refers to the initiative of adopting research initiatives and technology in agriculture for increased agricultural production. In India this movement was initiated in 1961 in Punjab. The aim was to convert agriculture into an industrial system by adopting modern methods and technology, such as the use of high yielding variety (HYV) seeds, tractors, irrigation facilities, pesticides and fertilizers. It was spear headed by the agricultural scientist M. S. Swaminathan in India.
- <sup>40</sup> A spiritually significant region in India, it is roughly equivalent to the Bastar division in the Chhattisgarh state in the central-east part of India. East Bengal refugees were

settled there in Permanent Liability (PL) Camps in inhuman conditions post-partition.

- <sup>41</sup> An island in the Sundarban, West Bengal famous for the Marichjhapi incident (Bengali: মৰিচঝাপি হত্যাকান্ত) of 1979. It refers to the forcible eviction of Bangladeshi refugees and the subsequent death of an unaccountable few hundreds by police firing, starvation and disease.
- <sup>42</sup> Rural village setting.
- <sup>43</sup> An Indian sparrow with brown body, white abdomen and yellow legs.
- <sup>44</sup> A proverbial quote showcasing the notion of musicality and symphony that orchestrates the happy domestic life of the Bengali middleclass household symbolized by the gramophone in a corner.
- <sup>45</sup> The cultural wing of the Communist Party of India, Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) was an association of leftist theatre-artists whose aim was to bring cultural awakening among the people of India. In West Bengal stalwarts such as Hemanga Basu, Shalil Coudhury, Utpal Dutta and many others were the members of IPTA.
- <sup>46</sup> A British economy car that debuted at the Earls Court Motor Show, London, on 20 September, 1948 and was popular in India.

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## **“WALKING WITH THE GODS”: WRITING BODY AND LAND IN INDIA’S NORTHEAST**

**Rakhee Kalita Moral**

### **Abstract**

This paper brings attention to a body of literature from the northeast region of India, specifically women’s writings that grow out of their organic relationship with the geography, its physical environment and, often, its entrenched histories thereof. Avowedly feminist, but with an ecological slant, I argue that the implicit and deep environmental concerns of the writers discussed inform these works with an ecological understanding of the space, dismantling earlier dualisms of nature/ culture or binaries of male/female representations of it. The paper is enabled by a theoretical framework built on existing and contemporary ecocritical and feminist discourse as it reads various writers whose separate genealogies intersect on the common ground of landscapes and women’s lives. Corporeal and even complicit, such a stance for these women writers is also a form of resistance against environmental damage and a plea for liveable homes charting the human interactions with the landscape out of which their poetry and fiction emerge. The literary canvas that is produced, is consequently, a network and web of humans and non-humans, the material and the physical, the mythic and the cosmic creating entangled spaces of imagination and new emotive engagements between known and unknown worlds.

**Keywords :** environment, landscapes, emotional geographies, material feminism, nature, imagination

*...writing is all about enchantment. It is a form of magic, of something from beyond the ordinary mind of the writer. Beyond the singular human form.*

- Linda Hogan

### **I**

In her 1962 book, *Silent Spring*, Rachael Carson for the first time offered, nearly six decades ago, a somewhat dark but timely warning to fellow Americans for the need to look around at the physical, corporeal world and recognise assaults upon its environment and the contamination of its air, earth, river, and seas. What easily begins like a fairy tale in the tradition of the pastoral,

There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings...Then a strange blight crept over the land

and everything began to change. Some evil spell had settled on the community... (and) everywhere was a shadow of death (Carson 1)

turns towards a dark catastrophe. And in what is now commonly considered as the founding text of eco-criticism in the western world, an urgent cautionary note of alarm was sounded to Carson's generation about the heavy toll that an anthropocentric universe had inflicted upon nature, resulting in a crisis and a call to feminist concern for the preservation of the land and for more sustainable ways of life with her 'Fable for Tomorrow'. While assuming that women or the female gender has been normatively associated with "nature," the "emotional," the material and even the particular, ecofeminists have rendered the connection more deep, nuanced and even validated it psychologically and philosophically.<sup>1</sup> Developments in ecofeminist and gyn/ecological thinking over the past few decades argue for a complex web of living/loving relationships between women and their own community and kind, and between women and the cosmos (Kolodny 1975; Daly 1978; Tong 2019). They reinforce the role feminist criticism has played in bringing to environmental philosophy some of the ways in which feminist theory challenges centrist thought and expands the canvas to increasingly include the non-human, and the *sub specie aeternitatis* view (Plumwood 1993), a step several times removed from the old gendered dualism of mind/ body in which the male/ female dichotomy is played out in the universe around culture/nature.<sup>2</sup>

As an academic and a woman writing from India's northeast, I pitch this discussion from spaces where women writers, poets and those who write fiction dwell and experience the self by discovering themselves in and with their habitat, environment and community, and significantly the ecosystems they embody and of which they are an inextricable part. The aspects of the politics of land and women addressed here are primarily via emergent voices in feminist spaces from a specific geography in India's northeast and are arguably enriched by the cultural critiques and ecofeminist representations in western literatures. The framework provides a useful model to understand how feminist poets and writers, and their writings exist as a new terrain that give voice to "dislocation, disembodiment and localisation that constitute contemporary social orders" (Bordo 545).<sup>3</sup> So while the cultural articulations speak through the feminised bodies of women and how they signify the land they inhabit, the representations are also responses to other simultaneous forces and threats in the social, political and intellectual worlds they belong in. To speak directly of how culture can correlate with these disjunctions by bringing writers and artists on board to find symbols, images, and narratives that adequately represent such changes seems a meaningful exercise, and gives ecocriticism both its purpose and its promise.

The paper draws from women poets and short story writers, novelists and from oral literatures of northeast India to unveil the experiences of womanhood and its more strident voices uniting the personal and the political, enabling a rich intertwined representation of space, politics and gender in locations where women find their natural homes, at once emotional and material. Most of the

writing taken up for analysis, written by women, have a collective consciousness of the relationship they strike with nature, something that primarily re-enacts a writing with and through the body, materially and intrinsically linking themselves to the environment, the earth, the waters, the forests and the wilds, creating a cosmos in which women experience the self. Arising out of the struggles of women to sustain themselves, their families and their communities is a plea for environmental protection as well as protection of women, preservation of indigenous cultures, traditional values, sustainable development and other issues surrounding the land that can bring about social change. The assumption that cultural texts construct particular notions of 'nature,' suggest therefore, that literary, visual and other representations of nature are reflections of certain temporal views about the treatment of nature. I also refer to the human-material entanglements that emphasise the linkages between human life and the non-human world and dismantle some of the nature/culture dichotomies earlier considered as givens in an enlightenment world. Reading with Bruno Latour, in this context, may help to expand the ambit of what is social to associations and "assemblages" in which the relational aspect of humans, non humans and things create a network of actors determining each other, more famously now referred to as the actor network theory( ANT).<sup>4</sup> Earlier Annette Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land* with its manifest symbolism of land-as-woman has provided a useful psycho-linguistic approach to contemporary debates around identities, belonging, home and justice among other concerns. Pushing the argument further towards other irreducible relationships, beyond mere symbolisms to larger networks in which subject positions and identities emerge because of the relations forged is what Donna Haraway 's *A Cyborg Manifesto* strives for as entanglements and reconfigurations of women and the non-human worlds are claimed over transcendent bodies of women or their epistemic purity.<sup>5</sup>

## II

While I do not suggest that writing by women that comes out of the region is a homogenous literature, most of the pieces featuring here are selected from a range of writings which shares the ease of a common language and can alternately be read as literature born of the historical exigencies of a postcolonial state struggling to keep the nation and its attendant experiences and expressions together. And while this carries the risk of flattening the individual experience of the women who write in a link language (in this case, English) willingly immersed in the Northeast India's Anglophone cultural production of knowledge of their own land and native lives, the larger objective of such an exercise is to also bring to the table a conversation that emanates from the intertexts of women's voices across spaces, regional and metropolitan, or for that matter Asian and Western. I argue that this enables a dialogue about and by women, on the environment, or as Adrienne Rich remarks, compels "the need to imagine a world in which every woman is the presiding genius of her own body..." such that writing through the

body articulates “the first step towards an eco-sensitive understanding of the female form” (292).

The poetics of self-writing evokes the complex and fraught existence of living in these ‘margins’ that the country’s northeast has figuratively been viewed as, where women’s bodies and the environment, at once fragile and hardy, take on the daily practices of the body as sites of multiple world-experiences imbued in the quotidian, and in the particular struggles of living. Such forms of representation and feminist expressions combine and conflate experience in these spaces with the twin prisms of body and world, without collapsing them into an essentialist subject-object binary making place and location integral to specific territorial identity, its imagined and real landscapes and their allegorical meanings in lives lived in those spaces.

In engaging with some feminist/woman poets and writers from India’s northeast, I read their inclination to relate to their environment as also a tool or a bridge between the personal (or the poetic-self) and the social, and more significantly as a framework to understand their corporeality and complicity in the intimate act of survival and resistance. The title chosen for this essay is from a poem by a writer in Northeast India I discuss here for her innate and seamless relationship with the mountains that are her home, and the near oracular figuration they mark onto lives in “small towns,” where to “walk with the gods” is both a revalidation of the space and the land that nurture them and more significantly, acknowledgment of the superior world of the nonhuman or more-than-humans around them. It sets the tone for the tropes that these writings adopt as imaginative expansions of the idea of place, cultural geographies, as it were, triggering off “human interactions” with a landscape or environment (Blair 1998).<sup>6</sup> Some of the works I shall illustrate from embody that powerful and expressive geography, a terrain that gives voice to dislocated, disembodied and dispossessed human realities which are implicated in natural history.

To invoke once again *Silent Spring*, Carson’s use of apocalyptic imagery and literary allusions in it established the relationship between physical environment, geographies so to speak, and a literature leading to what has since developed into ecofeminism with feminists too seeking to relate the environment to more social/personal concerns. Ecofeminists or contemporary nature writers often articulate a modern pastoral by imaging nature not merely as voices they appropriate the subject with but also as a desiring object. Karen Warren in her philosophical study of women, culture and nature, posits the idea of nature as a non-fixed embodied subject that humans can begin to know and understand in multiple ways and through intricate and intimate relationships between its constructs and the constructions of knowledge, desire, power, language, race, gender and sexuality (2014: 234). The ethical or environmental turn in feminism then seems historically only inevitable as early feminist models naturally evolved to more inclusive feminisms, foregrounding gender, race and sexuality to include colonisations of ecologies and the opposition of forms of hierarchy and their domination in its ambit. Establishing deeper and more rooted connections

between ecological/feminist literary practices and environmental ethics, particularly those of women and nature, can be potentially liberating for both women and non-human nature in the ecofeminist project and explain the presence of a large field of writers and activists who share a common cause, if through their own locations and perspectives towards a larger unified direction within differences of spatial awareness and /or of more nested space (Blair 548).

### III

With its longue durée of colonial domination, its cultural diversities and the more recent concerns of resistance towards the state and need for autonomous lives in pristine spaces that the country's northeast evokes, the feminist practices of writers and oral cultures available in these geographies evince interest about people, place and nature. The environment thus, is no longer something out there, an entity outside of oneself or an inert and empty space, but as Stacy Alaimo contends, a material/ spiritual presence, an “epistemological space” in which several actors comes together – a web or network of humans, non-humans, material, chemical, even the mythic and the cosmic - such that humans and their environment cease to be separate (238). Temsula Ao, Naga poet and writer and someone who has in the past three decades been regarded as a seminal voice from the northeast, observes how women of her tribe appropriate the power of the world, typically invested in males, through supernatural agency in imaginative tales and fiction from her native land (*On being a Naga* 2014). This she explains by alluding to Naga oral literature and the story of *Yajangla*, for instance, in which the eponymous female protagonist destroys her oppressive husband by transforming herself to a beast, and which by virtue of being a form other than human allows her to “reenter the realm of nature from that of nurture” where she is typecast only as submissive wife and mother thus realising for her, in that moment of combat, the ultimate enactment of power (81). And though in the conclusion to the story she reverses her form from animal back to human, *Yajangla* semiotically participates in a universe larger than the immediate cosmos of human beings revealing the interconnections between human corporeality and the mystical, or the more-than-human.

I emphasise the moral/ ethical dimension in which women radically reshape relations in and among various creatures, human and non-human and the underlying values of both the social and emotional worlds they inhabit. Clearly, Ao argues for inclusion and a reinterpretation of the past, enabling an imaginative and intuitive dialogue with the traditional way of life and collective pasts to create a literature relevant to both the native folk as well as to a universal audience about these inherent linkages. Also pertinent is the closeness of the poet to the mysteries of the land and earth that is sometimes her *terra incognita* in which new networks and habitats are necessarily forged. In her early verses, she recalls her violent encounter with the degradation of her forest home personifying its rocks, trees and foliage:

I stand at the village gate  
 In mockery of my former state  
 Once I stood in a deep forest, proud and content  
 My beloved of the laughing dimple  
 Standing by my side...

Then they dislodged me from my moorings  
 They tore me from her side  
 They chipped and chiselled  
 And gave me altered dimensions

(From ‘Prayer of a Monolith,’ *Songs from Here and There*)

Ao’s early leanings towards a liberal ecofeminist stance reaffirmed that women have the potential to conserve natural resources and maintain a balanced life with their environment. In the pristine spaces of the Naga hills, and also in Meghalaya, both part of the eastern Himalayan foothills in India’s northeastern landmass, where Ao spent most of her working life, the tearing down of once-virgin hills for the sake of development re-enacts for the feminist her devaluation with nature being recast as the feminist space. However, nature has for a long time been associated with women, almost synonymously sharing those corporeal attributes which the feminist project in the west has, necessarily, in the late twentieth century attempted to reconfigure and disentangle “woman” from “nature”. It is possible therefore to read in these articulations the “movement across human corporeality and nonhuman nature necessitating rich, complex modes of analysis that travel through the entangled territories of material and discursive, natural and cultural, biological and textual”. (*Material Feminisms* 253)

In more recent times such a trend is also witnessed in the writings from the region, in poetry and fiction that celebrate a certain dualism in which nature-culture, subject-object, mind-body have been reconfigured to no longer remain essentialist. I shall invoke two young writers to demonstrate this: Nitoo Das and Mona Zote, two different but equally feisty “Northeast poets,” one writing from the heart of the metropolis with an idiom inseparable from the elements surrounding her home by the river and against the hills, and the other homegrown in the deep of the old Lushai hills, now Mizoram, one of the more hidden and less-known frontiers of the country.<sup>7</sup> Topography and terrain naturally animate the poetics of these writers and their writing assume the somewhat ambivalent sense of a ‘wilderness,’ a departure from the traditionally held secure belief in the domesticated and tamed ‘pastoral’ of the past. That archetypal space of the pastoral which had notionally offered itself as a retreat or an escape, an almost sacrosanct space of refuge was different in nature from that of the unknown trials and dangers that stalk the forest and the wilds of the writers in the present discussion (Harrison 1992: 121). Developing his idea of the strange wilderness, and contesting the older form of signification tied to the wilds and natural spaces, RP Harrison in his classic reading of forests proposes that it

is possible to see “enchanting epiphanies” or “oracular disclosures” or even strange and monstrous symbolisms in them. Women writers from the region find resonance in their environment and seem to encounter the wilderness in a similar way that suggests a strange and seamless recognition, explaining both the claims upon their body and the land they embrace as their own to protect and preserve. Ecofeminist critic, Vera Norwood has argued that women write wilderness differently, “experiencing immersion rather than confrontation” while responding to their landscapes (334). Something of that nature is borne out by Mona Zote in her poem “What Poetry Means to Ernestina in Peril” on the troubled and restive land of her home in Northeast India:

What should poetry mean to a woman in the hills  
as she sits one long sloping summer evening  
in Patria, Aizawl, her head crammed with contrary winds,  
pistolling the clever stars that seem to say:  
Ignoring the problem will not make it go away.

So what if Ernestina is not a name at all,  
not even a corruption, less than a monument. She will sit  
pulling on one thin cigarillo after another, will lift her teacup  
in friendly greeting to the hills and loquacious stars  
and the music will comb on through her hair,  
telling her: Poetry must be raw like a side of beef,  
should drip blood, remind you of sweat  
and dusty slaughter and the epidermal crunch  
and the sudden bullet to the head.

In this now celebrated poem by Mona Zote, one that has been read innumerable times for its obvious context of the violence of a militant Northeast region, I am tempted to see Ernestina not as a victim, but one who wills to speak, from the hills, like a kinsperson, sending the cosmic pattern into silence “...the old goat bleats/ We are killing ourselves/ I like an incestuous land...Stars, be silent/ Let Ernestina speak... Waiter bring me something cold and hard to drink.”

For Mona Zote, arguably, a poet who has collective memories of violence and the Mizo insurgency that fought the nation in the sixties, the feminist space is inscribed with agency even as the church is mired in contempt and the poetic persona doesn’t belong in what she labels “the committee of good women.” The idiom is deliberate and unsentimental here, steeped in blood, and as Zote observes elsewhere in the backdrop of a “black hill disgorged of its warm minerals” (“Anti-love Poem”) and not wreathed in roses, recalling what Alaimo Stacy observes about nonhuman nature or the human body which can “talk back,” resist, or otherwise affect its own cultural construction.(242) Instead of remaining grooved in the essentialist repository of “nature” that has reinscribed for women the disadvantaged half of the binary in which she must forever belong, Zote performs the interventionist role of the material feminist whose prerogative it is to silence without sentiment the cosmic elements, and to force a drink to its hard end. Women have played significant roles, Buell observes, in their

“engagements with institutions of state, capital, indigenous structures and multiple forms of state politics” (2005:20), something that Mona Zote’s poem is foregrounded on while also alluding to the unspoken consecration that Ernestina shares with the elements of the hills of Patria in Aizawl. Her poetry or the cultural expressions from the space she inhabits provide a sense to the reader unfamiliar with its natural landscapes of the awareness of the deep connections between nature and the woman writing, and the overarching presence of the primeval and the timeless that continue to participate in human lives unsettled by temporal events.

In her *Boki* poems, written more than a decade back, Nitoo Das explores a similar agency in the poetic personae, whether from her pubescent preteen self, as the irreverent lover, or the unapologetic middle-aged and brazen Doiboki baring her breasts, or even the non-human, wise-eyed “wet crow” that speaks. The most daunting aspect of such a project is to radically rethink materiality, the “mere stuff” of bodies and natures that constitute feminist desires and the directions they take in animating what appear sterile, separate worlds.<sup>8</sup>

Both Mona and Nitoo perform their womanhood transcending biology and the culture: Mona with defiance grown in the madness of militancy, and Nitoo a rebel of patriarchy as much as of an oppressive nature in which she and her gender are placed. The latter’s poem, titled “Margherita,” is a performance of the ecofeminist who must necessarily respond to the threat of ecological damage in the face of the material realities of her environment and her lived relationships with nature and the community.

Margherita It was a word lisped for years until my mother taught me to blow air it to precision. Ma-rrr-gh-er-ita. Mar-gher-i-ta. Margherita. My mother’s home. This is where she was born. As deviant as the Lily of her name in the mines of Oxom. The starving Dihing in her backyard devoured her home making it smaller with each flood year. Tea kept her awake; coal embered inside her. Is there an escape alien queen? Ma-kum, Ma-kum (*Cyborg Proverbs*)

Nitoo Das’s seamless figuration of the coal-rich town of Margherita established during the colonization of the eastern province’s Upper Assam valley to which she traces her genealogy superimposed upon the heavily inundated tributaries of the Brahmaputra, flowing by her maternal home’s backyard, and the tea-factories in the vicinity coalesce in her poetry into a powerful knowledge about nature that is distinct from that of men of her class. It is at once her cultural leverage and her natural destiny that bring into her writing the ethical and the social consciousness of the cyborg (deliberately adopted as reigning metaphor of her poetry) that blurs boundaries between humans and technology and other founding dualisms that concern much feminist thought around images, ideas and narratives.

In her recent collection *Crowbite* (2020) she uses some of the old Khasi oral traditions and myths as tropes to erect the edifice of an ancient if lost people,

and poems like "Mawphlang" about a sacred and timeless grove that defies trespassers who pluck or take forest fruit and ageless trees that stand as silent witnesses to the rush of human speed and invasion into their secrecy. Her stance here is strongly reminiscent of native American writing and naturalist writer Linda Hogan's love for the "red country" of her Chickasaw tribe or her wisdom laid out in her prefatorial comments in *Dwellings* (1995) :

These writings have grown out of those questions, out of wondering what makes us human, out of a lifelong love for the living world and all its inhabitants. They have grown, too, out of my native understanding that there is a terrestrial intelligence that lies beyond our human knowing and grasping. (Introduction)

Nitoo exhibits a similar wonder and reverence for the universe, its smells, sights and sounds. Her book of birds and beasts, poems about flesh, fish and fowl mark her space in sites of the non-human, a cyborg's journey that gives one of her more recent poetry collections, its name, *Cyborg Proverbs* (2017). In the evolving feminist discourse, Nitoo is inalienable from Nature which is for her as Donna Haraway remarks:

...also a *trópos*, a trope. It is figure, construction, artifact, movement, displacement. Nature cannot preexist its construction, its articulation in heterogeneous social encounters, where all of the actors are not human and all of the humans are not "us," however defined. Worlds are built from such articulations. (*Material Feminisms* 2008)

In her poetry, Nitoo Das speaks of trees as company, a kindred world she inhabits, names that she rattles off like a list of familiar friends participating in their world, in their body and the semantics of their anatomy:

Everyone says she should sit  
on other trees. The usual trees.  
She, however, loved the Maulsari,  
the Bokul, the Kirakuli with its white flowers  
that she stuck to her breasts with spit. Sometimes,  
she hid within its hollows... Sometimes, she grew into  
petals: so auspicious, so fierce.  
The tree knew her like it knew me: the quiet  
of home, remorse of a river, clap  
of birds' wings over a scarce island.  
Clap!  
And she reassembles herself  
outside the trunk \_\_\_\_  
clavicle, calves, coccyx—  
until she becomes  
a pinprick of moondark.

(from "The Tree that Knew Her," *Cyborg Proverbs*)

Among many of Nitoo's wilderness poems, of trees, rivers, forests and hills the Cyborg poems also share the motif of return and escape , though unlike that of a simple retreat here one discovers the easy metamorphosis like the corporeal

‘jokhini’ (or simply, Assamese for witch) which blurs into trees, water, forests and becomes nature. In Nitoo’s feminist imaginary, the forest or its foliage are not merely “a consecrated place of oracular disclosures ...as a place of strange or monstrous epiphanies ...or as a sanctuary where wild animals may dwell in security far from the havoc of humanity ...” (Harrison 1992: 121) In synergy with the body that writes, the forest instead, is invested with the feline energies of a tree –nymph or a river spirit that seamlessly unite` the human with the non human, woman and witch, a mutualness which is the source of agency, of poet and woman.

She once told me  
 she never combed her hair.  
 Knotted, knee-length, lice-ridden  
 hair that could decode all stories.  
 Her hair is thrice song  
 and twice surrender.  
 The split ends are tributaries: Dibang,  
 Kameng, Dhonsiri, Subansiri,  
 the dandruff: stardust,  
 the grey: filaments of the day.  
 Her hair grew over branches, leaves...

(“Jokhini 2”)

The long knotted hair of the witch, signals towards an organicity that spills out of the grotesque body to grow into the land’s waterways and forests dissolving every venal and stock association of the witch. The feminist voice rings with disdain rejecting the older myth of the ideal wilderness, and invests it with the cynicism of the eco critic, or promotes on the other hand , a poetics of responsibility. This echoes Carolyn Merchant’s view that the nature that was "a replica of the cosmos....set in her crown as jewels were the signs of the zodiac and the planets; decorating her robe, mantle, tunic, and undergarments were birds, water creatures, earth animals, herbs and trees; on her shoes were flowers" is now dead. Instead that ‘natura’ has been violated, “her undergarments torn exposing her to the view of the vulgar”, as Nitoo’s poetry consciously writes through the body, locking the feminist impulse with her confessional mode, ready to give and partake of nature, in search of more livable worlds. (Merchant 1980; 1992).

And that strain of poetry connects the landscapes and feminist spaces of the region to an older poet and fiction writer, Mamang Dai who is firmly grooved in Northeast India’s literary canon. This reading of feminist poets and writers would hardly be adequate without taking a look at the intersectionalities that frame and fix their writings: Mamang, a tribal highlander for instance from Arunachal Pradesh rewrites the history of her race and the lives of Adi women that she embodies in her literary discourses, fiction, poetry and ethnography. A former bureaucrat familiar with the policies of state and governance, and self-willed writer by choice, Mamang Dai easily translates the body/land trope of her being into her poetry and her prose. In “River Poems”, and poems like “An

Obscure Place" she announces her everyday practice with her mountain home which is also the subject of her *Legends of Pensam* (2006) that presents its endangered environment to the outside world, a realm that she fiercely protects from the invading world of capital, cunning and development. "There are mountains /Oh! There are mountains/ We climbed every slope/ We slept by the river," ("An Obscure Place").

Dai is driven by the instinct for self-preservation of the race and the stoic passive role of women at once performing the role of a creative writer who is also cultural historian of her community and her native peoples.

The river has a soul.

It knows, stretching past the town...

When the soul rises

it will walk into the golden east,  
into the house of the sun.

In the cool bamboo,  
restored in sunlight,  
life matters, like this.

In small towns by the river

we all want to walk with the gods (*River Poems* 2004)

In many ways Mamang's writings (also *Legends of Pensam*) are a response to the exploitation, domination and devaluation of women as well as nature by patriarchal society. Technological development, which is considered by Cultural Ecofeminism to be essentially masculine, is responsible for degrading and ruthlessly exploiting the 'feminine' nature. As an ecofeminist she celebrates nature as a female entity, revisiting the ancient rituals of worshipping various goddesses and the female, a world in which gods and spirits coexist with mortals, and humans walk with non-humans.

A fresh and more recent exponent of such an arresting feminist geography is writer Janice Pariat, drawing from her native Meghalaya, whose fictions dwell in the shadowy zones between the mystical and nostalgia, between spirits and serendipity, a world that is gently hewn out of the very mists that envelope her people of the hills.

We were standing on a field at the head of a valley flanked by rows of jagged mountains that seemed to multiply themselves, growing higher and more distant, layering each other in shades of blue and green ... we walked to the edge of the field which dropped sharply into the valley. A wind swirled up, tugging at us with invisible hands. We sat in silence, listening to the wind, watching the way the mist changed shape of the trees , It looked like faces, the ones you pass in the street everyday ...At times the mist fragmented like light on the water, opening trails and doors and windows, settling into the bulky shapes of houses. It swirled like our feathered dancers holding swords and lamenting about an ancient tribal war; it tiptoed like women on the fringes, moving in slow, graceful lines...The mist was our history. (*Boats on Land* 136)

The protagonist of the above story, excerpted here, by Janice Pariat ('Laitlum') is nature, a topos, a place, in the sense of a rhetorician's place or topic for consideration of common themes; and we turn to this topic to order our discourse, to compose our memory. As a topic in this sense, nature also reminds us that in seventeenth-century English the "topick gods" were the local gods, the gods specific to places and peoples. These spirits are present rhetorically if we can't have them any other way. We need them, as Donna Haraway observes, in order to reinhabit, precisely, common places—locations that are widely shared, inescapably local, worldly, and enspirited. In this sense, nature is the place in which Janice rebuilds the public culture, outside of the reification, the appropriation or the nostalgia that it typically evokes (*Material Feminisms* 157).

The semiotics of these hill narratives, as Pariat lyrically exhibits, informs her writings with a fluidity that also points back to the reigning tropes of her early work, *Boats on Land* (2014) in which the water of deep and swift mountain streams hide the shape-shifting water spirits and nymphs that belong in another time and to another imagination that are what the author terms, "smoke –hazy, sun-tempered." Pariat gestures in this story towards a same-sex, lesbian emotion that captures the slow but symbolic meanings of the story which also participate in the other-worldly, ethereal and unspoken stories of the past. While Pariat captures inimitably the haunting beauty and mist-laden magic of the northeastern topography, she is the outlier in a sense who combines the signifying tropes of her own magical spaces with the larger and more universal portent of human lives as she moves out of those surreal and almost airy environment into the bustling urban everyday realities and ordinary instincts. Nature is thus a place , also to be inhabited, or to come back to without disrupting its terrain and so eternally prevails in the local and in the intuitive as Pariat's stories suggest, a sliding into that marks the lightness of her protagonists as creatures of an entangled world.

In conclusion, I offer a brief comment on another voice, from Nagaland, that of Easterine Kire (Iralu) whose journeys through her fictions, poetry and memoirs retrace the woman's route via memory and myth. As a historian of Kohima both in her recent fiction, *A Respectable Woman* and through *Mari*, her memoir about wartimes during the 1940s via the diaries of her aunt Mari, Kire brings a new awareness of various stories of exploitation and how her people cope with the struggle of ordering their lives around modern and contemporary maladies. Mari, like other her recent works is nearly a study of "healing" within geography and can be associated with the field of therapeutic landscapes in which the myths and lores of her people and land shape and give signification to her themes (*When the River Sleeps* 2014) . As a number of these studies touch on mental, emotional and even spiritual wellbeing, there has been a great deal of cross-fertilization with the literatures of emotional geography and how cultural and emotional expressions blend to ascribe meaning to place and people (Williams 2007; Milligan 2007)<sup>9</sup>

Easterine Kire has introduced into Northeast literature the idea of an emotional geography, a field that has done a great deal to extend ideas of health and healing within the spaces of women's writing—not least of which by including emotional wellbeing within its remit. Indigenous American writer Linda Hogan's *The Woman who Watches over the World: A Native Memoir* (2001) is a self—restorative work in American literature that explains the kind of writing Kire achieves:

Self-telling is rare for a Native Woman, but when I work on reservations with young people they want to know how I survived my life. I wish I could offer up a map and say, 'This way.' But it is not so easy. There are no roads through, no paths known, no maps or directions... It's not that we have lost the old ways and intelligences, but that we are lost from them. They are always here, patient, waiting for our return to their beauty, their integrity, their reverence for life. Until we do so, we will have restless spirits....  
(Introduction)

For Kire, her own native memoir, *A Respectable Woman* (2017) is a woman's attempt to come to terms with the devastation of the Kohima war, the loss of home and property and the deaths and destruction of family and loved ones in a sort of self-telling. Memory blurs from this landscape into the present and such an encounter with the spiritual geography of her land allows for healing and renewal. The remembered landscape of Kohima and the Naga hills, is both traumatic and cathartic fired by the restless memory of a past and the community. Hers is an account of the devastation of land, of the destruction of lives and the onslaught of war, something that took forty-five years for her mother "to bring herself to talk about"(3). It is a world inhabited by memory, by spirits, "something beyond the singular human form", as it were, and by encounters with ghosts and the remembered moments. Kire matter-of-factly refers to these as "spirit sightings", something she claims Angamis (the tribe she belongs to) are familiar with. People believe and claim, she says, "that spirits have favourite haunts such as village ponds, the village gate, big boulders, great trees, abandoned houses and gullies, and graveyards" (176). Kire's Kohima mappings is also at one level an obituary of the old Naga villages that have given way to the urban reorganisation of Kohima in which several forest areas have made place for private residences, along with the disappearance of the commons and the old lots that were characteristic of the town. Her novel ends with a short statement on the Prohibition Act of 1989 which bans alcohol in the state, but she also observes that alcoholism is a problem and alcohol-related deaths continue unabated as the flow of adulterated alcohol, containing methanol and other toxins remains unchecked in Nagaland.

In a recent conversation Kire, however, makes clear that while she does not toe the "feminist" line nor fit any narrow political end she writes for the people, through a re-telling of the most traumatic events that shaped lives on those hills, in the form of "people-stories".<sup>10</sup> The narratives abound in experience and story-telling, of corporeal truths, and the stories of the community and its

environment. In that sense, her environment conflates the natural world with the built-up dimensions to become the transformed land. Arguably, the eco-sensitive nature of her work serves as a bridge between personal histories and between women and the environment, creating a brand of self-conscious and self-reflexive writing that involves what Lawrence Buell has called “acts of environmental imagination.”<sup>11</sup> They connect readers to places with an empathy that make for a new kind of caring for the physical world, and possibly for alternative futures, and elicit in the attentive reader deep thoughts “about a cherished, abused or endangered place”(2001:2). The readings, selective but sensitive, chosen in this discussion cannot perhaps overemphasise the need to attend to these voices that sound concern about our fragile and vanishing worlds, our attraction for the enduring green spaces and, above all, the sacred bonds that exist between humanity and the environment, ostensibly known worlds and the unknown wilderness.

### **Notes :**

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- <sup>1</sup> As opposed to the earlier feminist quarrel with the patriarchal view of women as soft and coterminous with nature rendering the gender weak, fragile and emotional, ecofeminists have adopted the same metaphors but as strength and have predicated the responsibility of women on this association and their ability to intervene in ecosystems that need repair, and within writing communities which culturally represent the hierarchies existing in their social and personal worlds.  
See, for example, Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land* (1975) and Louise Westling, *The Green Beast of the World* (1996), both of which differently argue how the feminised landscape offers an escape from a physically brute environment and how women may remedy this condition but, perhaps, sometimes by falling back into the old cultural trap of the lost pastoral and its nostalgia.
  - <sup>2</sup> The present essay while being a gendered and cultural account of ecofeminist writing from India’s northeast region and its complex and layered concerns about a space germane to contestations over land, its politics, and its multicultural peoples, is attended by the awareness of the tendency to read with an overtly theoretical critical practice of writing for an endangered world, and thus necessarily makes use of tropes as metaphor and rhetoric.
  - <sup>3</sup> Susan Bordo’s work, uses a set of cultural markers to analyse the body and the reproduction of feminity, as she takes a critical gaze at persisting dualisms even in the postmodern contemporary culture and how the gendered nature of mind/body occurs and recurs in institutional and cultural expressions in which the construction of the self is manifestly located.
  - <sup>4</sup> Latour’s ‘Actor Network Theory’ in *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor Network Theory* (2005) established the idea of non-human agency with his principle of symmetry between human and non-human actors that occurs in the network. Also useful in this context is Ian Hodder, *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Human and Things* (2012) that has a somewhat different reading from Latour’s.

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- <sup>5</sup> See, Eva Haifa Giraud, *What Comes After Entanglement* (2019) on how the interrelations between humans, species, communities and environments are nearly impossible to disentangle and elicit new complexities.
- <sup>6</sup> See for instance, Sara Blair," Cultural Geography and the Place of the Literary "(1998) which points to the neat tying up of the temporal in human experience with the spatial, making way for a new cultural geography that gives voice to the many disruptions of the present. I am influenced by Blair's proposition of the organizing principle of space as sites of meaning and expression for the writers from India's northeast that I cite in the essay.
- <sup>7</sup> I use the term 'Northeast poet' here as a label that has gained currency for some time now in the country's northeastern region to include writers writing from the space and do not attempt to problematize the nomenclature in the present essay. However, I am engaged in addressing the term critically elsewhere in a forthcoming volume on the nature of writings from this geography and why they merit a technically different category from the simple directional or 'cultural' one that is widely used for writings from the region. See also, T. Misra, *Oxford Anthology to Writings from NE India*. Vols 1&2 ( Introduction) , New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011
- <sup>8</sup> See for instance, Bruno Latour... Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene. *New Literary History*. 2014, 45(1). 1-18. Latour develops the notion of relational worlds, germane to this reading of women, land and the ecological imagination.
- <sup>9</sup> See for instance, Milligan, Christine, Amanda Bingley, and Anthony Gatrell. "'Healing and Feeling': The Place of Emotions in Later Life." In *Emotional Geographies*, edited by Joyce Davidson, Liz Bondi and Mick Smith, 49-62. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005
- <sup>10</sup> Easterine Kire refuses to wear any one of the distinct labels that readers are keen to fix on her. She is clear about her purpose as a writer of her community without being grooved into stereotypes. See for instance, <https://raiot.in/writing-nagaland-a-conversation-with-easterine-kire/>Literary critic and academic Pradip Acharya in a conversation with this author observes that Kire's strength as a writer derives in the main from the "inherited and transcendent values" of her community and people
- <sup>11</sup> See also, *Writing for an Endangered World* (2001), Buell's master narrative on the ways that literature, culture and the environment collaborate from older centuries to the present to debate the hazards of the physical world and direct attention to new alternatives for safer futures.

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## **THE POSTFEMINIST WORLD-VIEW AND SUPERHEROINES : CRITIQUING FEMALE REPRESENTATIONS WITHIN THE SUPERHERO GENRE**

**Anindya Syam Choudhury and Kinshuk Chakraborty**

### **Abstract**

'Postfeminism' is a term that is often used to describe a media and publishing phenomenon, with the societal perception that many or all of the goals of feminism have already been achieved. This perception, however, ironically contradicts many essential feminist ideologies. In fact, postfeminism may purport to be a powerful tool for women but it also insinuates that women lack agency, saturating the media with examples of 'girl power' and 'real' depictions of women, merely to make women consumers of their own selves. This article begins with a discussion of what constitutes postfeminism and a postfeminist world-view before dwelling on how comic books constitute a significant part of this postfeminist media culture. Comics are a unique popular-culture art form with the potential to inform, persuade, and model attitudes and behaviours. Although they are often overlooked as potential research materials, comics provide powerful and reflective messages about varying cultures, and garner the possibilities to challenge the prevalent status quo and develop profound meaning that challenges conventional narratives. However, this potential to challenge cultural norms in comics is, in many cases, warped and manipulated by ideological impositions and consumer backlash. It has been found that comic book narrative structures device a model of 'consistent' storytelling and stereotypical character delineations to attract and satisfy the readers while being conscious of the power structures that arouse such forms of 'consistent' creations. In this context, it may be pointed out that comic books also attempt to subtly critique these very power structures through the incorporation of minute cultural analysis and problematic character developments in them. Popular comics with female protagonists or with a female congregation appear to be primary instances of such kind of narrative modeling. In such comics, women are often defined in the postfeminist sense of empowerment and sexual freedom, but only through their engagement with the consumer culture. What is reinforced through the strategies of postfeminism is the idea that through consumerism and overt displays of sexuality, women can assert a deeply feminized power but with the demand that women buy and display specific, culturally aligned performances. Initially, there have been attempts to manipulate these cultural implications

by adhering to their principles while subtly critiquing and commenting on them. The representation of Wonder Woman's in *Ms.* magazine, an American liberal feminist magazine, was one such attempt, trying to incorporate feminist ideologies under the guise of popular representations of women. But such representations have, since then, only helped in reinforcing those prevalent popular conceptions. While Wonder Woman's legacy had become one that meant that empowerment happens by being overtly sexual, the primary goals of *Ms.* magazine failed to reach out to people because it was hard for many women to relate to characters like Wonder Woman. Although there have been attempts to create more relatable female comic book characters, they also appear to have fallen prey to the dictates of the popular/consumer culture. Detective Comics's Harley Quinn and the female superhero team 'Birds of Prey' provide crucial examples for understanding the postfeminist representations imbibed in comic books. Marvel Comics's Araña (Anya Corazon), Dust, and Ms. Marvel (Kamala Khan) also provide significant case studies of the postfeminist world-view and its implications upon the racial and religious quandary of such narratives. This paper would attempt to look at such comic book representations related to the aforementioned female characters (and also refer to their motion picture and animated series counterparts) through specific lenses of feminism(s) and gender studies to enquire into the mechanisms of postfeminist representations and their intricate association to consumer culture.

**Keywords :** Comic books, consumer culture, Ms. Marvel, postfeminism, superheroines, Wonder Woman

## The Postfeminist World-view: Different and Differing Perspectives

The term 'postfeminism' has been mired in controversies of various kinds right since its inception in the 1980s. While, as Sarah Gamble points out, there has been a bit of confusion around postfeminism (as also around postmodernism) primarily because of "the semantic uncertainty generated by the prefix", with 'post' being usually taken to mean 'after in time or order' and not exactly "rejection", scholars like Tania Modleski (in *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a 'Postfeminist' Age*) and Susan Faludi (in *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*) have been quite forthright in their description of postfeminism as essentially anti-feminist(37). Modleski, for instance, has stated that postfeminist texts "are actually engaged in negating the critiques and undermining the goals of feminism", thereby "delivering us back to a prefeminist world"(3). In a similar vein, Faludi has portrayed postfeminism as a kind of anti-feminist backlash, resulting in the undoing of the ground gained by feminism:

Just when record numbers of younger women were supporting feminist goals in the mid-1980s (more of them, in fact, than older women) and a majority of all women were calling themselves feminists, the media declared that feminism was the flavour of the seventies and that 'postfeminism' was the new story – complete with a younger generation who supposedly reviled the women's movement. (5)

This attack on postfeminism, through the rhetoric of relapse, is counterpointed by ‘sex-positive’(post)feminists like Naomi Wolf, Katie Roiphe, Christina Hoff Sommers and Camille Paglia *et. al.*, whose work “is underpinned by a binarised distinction between ‘victim feminism’ and ‘power feminism’” in which the latter is positioned “as the only viable way in which to counteract the supposed lack of agency in victim feminism” (Gillis and Munford 167). Advocating ‘power feminism’, Katie Roiphe, in *The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism*, for instance, decries the inappropriate image of the victimisation of women (which, in her opinion, furthers the perception of women as sexual objects) fostered by second-wave feminism in the following manner:

The image that emerges from feminist preoccupations with rape and sexual harassment is that of women as victims.... This image of a delicate woman bears a striking resemblance to that fifties ideal my mother and the other women of her generation fought so hard to get away from. They didn't like her passivity, her wide-eyed innocence. They didn't like the fact that she was perpetually offended by sexual innuendo. They didn't like her excessive need for protection. She represented personal, social, and psychological possibilities collapsed, and they worked and marched, shouted and wrote, to make her irrelevant for their daughters. But here she is again, with her pure intentions and her wide eyes. Only this time it is feminists themselves who are breathing new life into her. (6)

In this context, mention may be made of an incident narrated by Misha Kavka (in her article titled “Feminism, Ethics, and History, or What is the ‘Post’ in Postfeminism?”) when she saw a sticker reading “I’LL BE A POSTFEMINIST IN A POSTPATRIARCHY” stuck onto the doors of “out-and-out second-wave feminists” (29). Kavka considers this instance to infer that while postfeminism initially began as a theoretical approach to deconstruct the aging concept of feminism, it soon turned into a completely new concept which attempted to look at itself as a signifier of historical periodization. The ‘post’ of the term ‘postfeminism’, thus, potentially signifies a movement ‘after’ feminism in a chronological sense. In the words of Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, when used in this sense, postfeminism might be said to mark an “*epistemological break within feminism*” which “implies transformation and change within feminism that challenges ‘hegemonic’ Anglo-American feminism” (3). When considered in such a way, a postfeminist approach might address the theoretical gaps of second-wave feminism, which has often been criticized for its white, middle-class, Anglo-American bias with regard to the issue of oppression of women.

In many ways, then, postfeminism has often been seen as a phenomenon drifting away from the ideals or goals that constituted the core of feminism. This wavering away from the goals has caused a sort of detachment and this makes those goals and ideals seem to be something of the past. As a result, there is a sense of simmering nostalgia attached with those detached values and goals and gender traditionalism. However, while postfeminism has been seen to exhibit a reactionary stance, it cannot be denied that postfeminism inextricably relies on

feminism to function as a discourse. This “double entanglement” of postfeminism, leading to a complexification of the backlash argument (“Postfeminism” 28), has been pointed out lucidly by Mc Robbie, who remains one of the pioneering commentators on the complex relationship between feminism and postfeminism:

[P]ostfeminism . . . [refers] to an active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s come to be undermined. . . . [T]hrough an array of machinations, elements of contemporary popular culture are perniciously effective in regard to this undoing of feminism while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to “feminism.” (“Postfeminism” 27)

Another important facet of postfeminism is its fascinating resemblance to neoliberal culture. Dane Richardson and Victoria Robinson, in their book *Introducing Gender and Women's Studies*, describe neoliberalism as a framework that espouses the idea of liberating the markets and leaving them to the freeplay of the market forces and withdrawal of government control on issues like social welfare. They also argue that it is useful to think of neoliberalism “as a form of regulation or governmentality and an ideological framework of ideas and values that emphasise commodification and consumerism, professionalization and managerialism, and individualism and freedom of ‘choice’”(xxi). The neoliberal stratagem makes empowered women responsible for her individual choices – choices which tend to cater to a consumerist culture. In essence, the choice rhetoric is one of the main foci of the postfeminist world-view.

In this scenario, a woman’s ‘choices’ based on her own ‘self’ takes a detour from the political to the personal as she is now empowered because she can choose, as the postfeminist rhetoric would suggest, as opposed to a time in the very distant past where she may have been forced to live a certain type of life. In a particular situation, an ideal postfeminist subject, despite having a plethora of choices and options to choose from, tends to choose a specific criterion which is rendered desirable to her. Tasker and Negra point out that “postfeminism is white and middle class by default” (2), but the postfeminist stance towards racial discrimination triggers the gory history of marginalization of the women of colour. Though the postfeminist world-view guarantees individual space to women, including those coloured, a careful observation reveals how it caters to the needs of white women and accords them a privileged status. While women of colour do appear in postfeminist media texts, the focus is overwhelmingly on assimilation as well as respectability. While the postfeminist culture staunchly believes in a situation where all ‘empowered’ women have access to equal opportunities, the plight of women subjected to racial discrimination is pitiful because it does not seem to do enough to accord them the dignity of existence.

### **Postfeminism and Wonder Woman, the First Superheroine**

In the light of the above discussion on the postfeminist world-view, it would be interesting to analyse the noticeable changes that have occurred in the

last few decades in the domain of superhero comics, especially with regard to the issue of the representation of women characters. Historically under-represented or misrepresented, superheroines became more prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s, when more and more female-led titles and powerful female characters appeared in a male-dominated world. While many second-wave feminists were involved in Black and Hispanic civil rights movements, as well as the emerging politics around gay and lesbian rights, “it is the intersecting of a range of concerns, including gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, age, and class, that came to be the defining element of the so-called third-wave in the early 1990s, and is the key to understanding recent shifts in representations of gender in superhero comics”, as Curtis and Cardo point out in their article “Superheroes and third-wave feminism” (382). An understanding of this is important for appreciating the recent shifts in the representations of gender in superhero comics. While diverse superheroines began to appear in the later decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, their representation had its ‘real’ initiation through the figure of Wonder Woman although Fantomah, created by Fletcher Hanks, predates her by a couple of years. While different interpretations of the character have emerged over the years, the most common Wonder Woman origin story is the one in which Queen Hippolyta of Themyscira created a clay sculpture of a little girl and begged the Greek goddess Aphrodite to bring her to life. The child named Diana grows up and trains herself in the island of all-women Amazon warriors. The island is hidden from the rest of the world, until an American spy pilot in World War II, Steve Trevor, crash-lands there. Diana then leaves Themyscira to join the war effort, adopting the name ‘Wonder Woman’. In some recent works like Jill Lepore’s *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*, Tim Hanley’s *Wonder Woman Unbound: The Curious History of the World’s Most Famous Heroine* and Noah Berlatsky’s *Wonder Woman: Bondage and Feminism in the Marston/Peter Comics, 1941-1948*, the authors have tried to unravel several deeper mysteries behind Wonder Woman’s origin. Berlatsky in his work, for instance, has pointed out how Marston (the creator of Wonder Woman), a psychologist, developed his “DISC theory, which referred to Dominance, Inducement, Submission, and Compliance” and applied it to his creation of Wonder Woman(8). Throughout the years that Marston wrote and developed the comic character, images of bondage and extreme violence were an inextricable part of the character of Wonder Woman. Wonder Woman, for instance, could be seen either chained or subduing others with her own lasso on a regular basis. The chaining of Wonder Woman could be regarded as symbolising the struggles of women during the Suffragette Movement in the United States, and the breaking of the chains possibly symbolised the breaking free of women from social fetters put in place by patriarchy. In the words of Finn, Marston used Wonder Woman to promote his ideological agenda of “women’s political power, economic independence, and social authority” although “the comic book’s persistent bondage theme” and her skimpy costume “undermine Wonder Woman’s agency and relegate her to an object of male fantasy”(7). After Marston’s death in 1947, the character was stripped of her super-abilities and new storylines were created to display Wonder

Woman as having greater agency in leisure. This new interpretation provoked a critique by prominent feminist, Gloria Steinem, who then put Wonder Woman in her classic costume on "the cover of the first stand-alone *Ms.* magazine in July 1972" (Berlatsky 14). Although the extent of bondage in the comics decreased since Marston's time, it still retained its popularity among the readers, and even Steinem had been enthusiastic about this version of Wonder Woman's character. In this context, Berlatsky in his book points out that "images of disempowerment, then, may be popular with women because they mirror women's actual disempowerment" (13). Berlatsky takes the example of *Wonder Woman #13* (which was reprinted in the 1972 *Ms.* collection) where there is a crisis in Paradise Island and the Amazon women require Wonder Woman to show them how to "snap the heaviest chains, and giant boulders" (14). Though the story ends with the Amazons succeeding in their quest under Wonder Woman's supervision, the imagery of bondage hardly diminishes, as "the Amazon girls, all dressed in short, flirty skirts, are shown winding ropes and chains around the (as always) be-swimsuited Wonder Woman, tying her fast to a wooden pole . . ." (15). In this regard, Berlatsky asks the following questions:

Why does raising women's self-esteem require bondage imagery exactly?  
Isn't there a way we could get the feminist message without the cheerful-yet-kinky sexual charge? (15)

Hence, although Wonder Woman may appear to be a representation of women empowerment and may seem to promote homogeneity among women, the methods used in representing such empowerment are problematic and the homogeneity appears forced. From a postfeminist worldview, the Wonder Woman in chains (although she undergoes various transformations with regard to her dress, weapons, etc., over the many decades of her existence) would possibly represent a kind of 'victim feminism' (which was discussed earlier), without much agency, independence and freedom of choice. However, Wonder Woman also seems to "enact patriarchal notions of strength" and becomes a kind of hybrid entity where a woman "must meet masculine measures of success" while still upholding her femininity (Laura Lane *et al.* 498). This is a quintessential postfeminist framework into which Wonder Woman seems to fit.

### **Comics, Postfeminism and the Representation of Contemporary Superheroines**

There is no gainsaying that comics are a unique popular-culture art-form with the potential to inform, persuade, and model attitudes and behaviours. As Groensteen points out, comic books are a "story-related pleasure", an "art-related pleasure", and a "medium-related pleasure", a combination that cannot be found in any other medium whether it be film, television, photography, or novels (10). In a similar vein, Duncan and Smith opine that "at their best, comic books can accommodate content as profound, moving, and enduring as that found in any of the more celebrated vehicles for human expression" (2). It is worth mentioning

that the last two decades have seen a substantial change in regard to the representation of characters in the comics. Especially, the 1960s and 1970s have seen the underrepresented women characters appearing and occupying space in what has been assumed to be a male-dominated world. To understand the shift in representation and the blitzkrieging of female characters, it is important to take a detour to the civil rights movements of the Blacks and the Hispanics, and the political movements for gay and lesbian rights. While these movements were organised to address specific issues affecting those particular groups, the intersection of several factors like colour, race, ethnicity and class became a unified driving force for the movements which subsequently triggered a massive shift with regard to the representation of women characters in comics. Duncan and Smith claim, in their book *The Power of Comics*, that although comics can “function as catalysts for the raising of social consciousness among their readers, the industry that produces them has a less consistent record for taking more direct action to change existing disparities in power relations” (265). In order to convey ideological meanings, comics function as “imagetexts” that utilize both textual and visual communication (Mitchell 56). The representations of race and gender are some of the most apparent ideological descriptors on the comic book page because of their visual cues. These representations maybe wayward, bearing no semblance with reality. As Royal explained:

To put it bluntly, comics - by necessity - employs stereotypes as a kind of shorthand to communicate quickly and succinctly. This being the case, it is up to the comics artist to tell her or his story as effectively as possible without slipping into the trap, even inadvertently, of inaccurate and even harmful representations. (68)

Comics and their creators may purposefully or unintentionally misrepresent characters or reality in order to fulfill presumed stereotypes, perpetuate ideologies in the prevalent culture, or otherwise appeal to readers. In this paper, an attempt has been made to analyse and explore these ideological undercurrents pertaining to the postfeminist world-view, with specific references to the discourses of gender which both compliment and challenge it. The representations that have been considered for analysis in this paper include DC Comics's female superhero team 'Birds of Prey' (particularly Oracle and Vixen), the anti-hero(ine)/villain Harley Quinn, and Marvel Comics' Spider-Girl (*Araña*), Dust, and the new Ms. Marvel (Kamala Khan).

One of the main reasons for the recent intervention in superhero comics is precisely that third-wave feminism/ postfeminism is part of a broader engagement with the intersectional axes of class, sexuality, race, ethnicity, disability, and complex gender politics which have come together in really innovative ways around the wider issue of representation. While third-wave feminism is replete with contradictory stances, positions and diverse movements, this diversity has actually been a major enabler in bringing together writers to herald a significant impact on the genre superhero comics. In their article titled “Contradiction as Agency: Self-Determination, Transcendence, and Counter-

Imagination in Third Wave Feminism", Valerie R. Renegar and Stacey K. Sowards point out that contradiction is precisely what leads to innovation. "Contradictions found in third-wave feminism" they write, "are often designed to challenge traditional notions of identity and to create ambiguities, divergences, incompatibilities, and different ways of thinking" (6). They argue that contradictions enable women "to discover and experiment with the various dimensions of themselves" (8), which can consequently enable "new possibilities and options for everyday experiences and activism" (2). As Shelley Budgeon has noted, another key feature of third-wave feminism is seeing "popular culture simultaneously as a site of pleasure and an object of critique" (280). This is also in keeping with Christine Gledhill's idea of "pleasurable negotiations", which is basically a call for "rethinking relations between media products, ideologies and audiences" and a way to understand femininity and womanhood not as abstract "textual" positions, but as "lived" socio-cultural categories (169) from which women make varied use and interpretation of media products. Postfeminism, much like postmodernism, caters to the late capitalist culture that thrives on work, leisure and a consumerist culture. It has been largely able to integrate itself with economic discourses, signifying that the self must conform to the existing demands of market culture.

The writing in *Birds of Prey* supports female agency while the artwork denies it, and, through this balance of agency and denial, it creates a postfeminist image text. Other features such as consumerism, self-surveillance attribute a postfeminist colour to it. The text is postfeminist because it projects powerful characters but again limits their capacities besides indulging in racial discrimination. There are a few moments in the work that show a postfeminist world-view at work, even in a writing trajectory that is meant to emphasize the strengths of women and their relationships with one another. One of the important incidents in the work is when Barbara is in hospital, crying after her seizure, but Black Canary, another female character, shows Barbara how there is mascara all over her face. This incident suggests that even in times of pain Black Canary cares about Barbara's appearance or, at least, believes that Barbara would want her to help maintain her appearance. Black Canary surveys Barbara to keep her exterior in check and up to the standard beauty codes. Barbara, after all, must conform to the codes of sex appeal and exquisite appearance. The industry thrives in making women appear desirable, conforming to the traditional heterosexual notions, and thus the postfeminist culture expects women to appear how the free market desires them to so that they become viable consumables across the media. Another instance of how maintaining a particular kind of 'acceptable' appearance occurs during the second fight between Huntress and Vixen. As Huntress kicks Vixen in the face, a caption box reads, "Come on... you're a model, Mari. You can't like getting your nose broken" (Dixon 3). Even during a fight, Huntress aims to snap Vixen back into reality by attacking her superficial features. A broken nose, to Huntress, may have a greater effect on a model (who cares about her appearance) than some other sort of brute force. In a fight scene, one would expect the characters to focus on surviving rather than on

how they appear, and yet Huntress targets Vixen's superficial beauty. Through Huntress's aiming at Vixen's nose what is intended to be shown perhaps is that the way to make a woman truly feel pain is by attacking her physical appearance, specifically her face. *Birds of Prey* seems to reinforce stereotypes and also emphasizes impractical clothing and things that do not serve much purpose. There is, of course, an espousal of the belief in emancipation of women but the artwork seems to be besmeared with conventional sexist/ racist practices. The costumes that the characters wear point towards this: while Vixen's costume covers her entire 'black' body thereby hiding the racial signifiers, Huntress's costume is interesting because she wears only a one-piece swimsuit with a cut to show her midriff and thigh-length boots. The artwork does not give her pants or anything similarly practical. Black Canary's costume in *Birds of Prey* comprises a black, leather swimsuit with fishnet stockings. The characters, therefore, are kept racialized and sexualized possibly in order to cater to the requirements of the (white) male gaze, and this runs counter to the female power argument that the comic book supposedly espouses.

The inclusion of 'hot' superheroines has been in vogue within the realm of comic books for decades. The designers have more often than not crafted the superheroines, irrespective of the medium, in a way which has enabled them to wield their sexual power. Whether good or evil, the drawings of these women has constituted what has been called "bad girl art", a term that originated in the 1990s, and which referred most specifically to comic book women who were "anti-heroine characters, often portrayed as cruel, mercenary, or demonic . . ." ("Bad Girl Art" Online). In her work titled *Busting Out All Over: The Portrayal of Superheroines in American Superhero Comics from the 1940s to the 2000s*, Brandi Florence analyses such a kind of "bad girl art" in which (anti) superheroines (having "super-sized" breasts, strong thighs, and thin waists) are often depicted in uncomfortable, erotic positions (97). In *Birds of Prey*, the one Black female character, Vixen, is portrayed as feral and savage. Her representation is inherently flawed and troublesome because she is mostly portrayed as erratic. Of course, her mind is being controlled by one of the villains for a significant portion of the story but the comic still paints her as animalistic. Vixen is tied to the primal, animal-like representation; her name itself is a sexualized reference to foxes, and she can tap into the natural world to draw upon the powers and traits of animals. Vixen's portrayal is primarily negative because it relies upon racist attitudes towards Black women as primal and animalistic; she is shown to have the potential for transgressing the divide between humans and animals. This particular type of representation resonates with Patricia Hill Collins's notion of 'matrix of domination', which she elucidates in her book *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. Collins utilises this concept to underscore that one's position in society is made up of multiple contiguous standpoints rather than just one essentialist standpoint. It assumes that power operates in a top-down manner by forcing and controlling unwilling victims to bend to the will of more powerful superiors. Collins opines that "depending on the context, an individual may be an oppressor, a member of

an oppressed group, or simultaneously oppressor and oppressed.... Each individual derives varying amounts of penalty and privilege from the multiple systems of oppression which frame everyone's lives" (226). In addition, Collins emphasizes "that people simultaneously experience and resist oppression on three levels: the level of personal biography; the group or community level of the cultural context created by race, class, and gender; and the systemic level of social institutions" (227). Vixen's animal power is explicitly a sign of this because she is Black and can switch between different species of animals in order to exhibit her superpower. This representation is troubling because the text apparently tries hard to celebrate the power of women. What it ends up doing, however, is relying upon racist stereotypes.

*Birds of Prey* puts forward the argument that differently-abled people should be treated equally, and that they possess many unique and liberating traits. So the representation of the 'bad girl' in case of the character named Barbara Gordon (the Batgirl) gets transformed into one of a quintessentially 'good girl' owing to her physical disability because it forces her to give up the mantle of Batgirl. The transformed Barbara Gordon is represented as the computer-hacker, Oracle, whose aptness with technology is unmatched. Despite being physically disabled, she is a genius in the world of computers, a hacker with unmatched agility and agency. The various representations of disability in popular culture are necessary to develop positive attitudes towards the differently-abled people and celebrate them as equals. Garland-Thomson claims that "disability – like gender – is a concept that pervades all aspects of culture: its structuring institutions, social identities, cultural practices, political positions, historical communities, and the shared human experience of embodiment" ("Integrating Disability" 4). In American culture, the differently-abled people have generally been ignored in favour of the able-bodied ideal, and if a differently-abled person happens to be a woman, her misery gets multiplied manifold. In this context, Barbara Jordan can be said to have negotiated her double jeopardy (of being a woman and a differently-abled person) skillfully by utilizing her photographic memory and technological prowess to carve a niche for herself in the comic book universe. Barbara Gordon's case seems to be akin to what Ellis and Kent point out in *Disability and New Media*:

Digital media and online technology hold the promise that people with disability will be included in social life, diminishing the impact their impairment has on their social life. (59)

Both a sex-positive approach and the adoption of "rhetorical strategies"(Valerie R. Renegar and Stacey K. Sowards 8) of patriarchy– such as the claim that "our desires aren't simply booby traps set by the patriarchy"(Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards 136)– have meant that women writers have been able to use images of scantily-clad heroines and do a 'Good Girl/Bad Girl' makeover of characters that previously were not drawn that way, such as the transformation that Harley Quinn went through at the hands of Amanda Conner. Harley Quinn appeared in the DC animated Universe as the

Joker's psychiatrist and later his girlfriend, thereby situating herself on the side of the evil as a member of gang Criminal Gallery/Rogue's Gallery. Initially, Harley appeared in full clothes, covered from tip to toe, but soon changed into a 'hot' sleazy figure in shorts. Initially, the less sexualised representation meant that she was under the control of the Joker. After being out of the relationship with the Joker, Harley Quinn dons an attractive outfit to charm others through her sexualised portrayal but then again she stays in complete control of it. The most important figure in her life now is Poison Ivy, another female character undergoing a transformation from villain to anti-hero, and with whom Harley starts a relationship. In bed together, they chat, almost like teenagers, with Harley wearing a pair of pink fluffy bunny slippers, a sign of childishness or innocence in stark contrast to her actual life. She is also regularly shown making herself up and choosing different costumes, because she could not stand to be as boring as Superman and wear the same outfit every day. This appropriation of the supposed tools of patriarchy (makeup, high heels, etc.) fits very well with some of the aspects of third-wave feminism, such as renegotiations of ideas of femininity and fluid sexuality.

In DC's *New 52* series (where Harley Quinn has a stand-alone comic book title), Harley Quinn is shown to inherit a property and rents a part of it tenants. She uses the roof to shelter animals in the first volume. She exhibits the role of a psychiatrist, a vigilante, an animal rights activist and a landlord. She is also a bisexual woman who has had her skin bleached bone-white and needs to put on makeup to pass as 'white' (and hence 'normal') when she returns to her professional engagements as a therapist. She arrives in Coney Island riding a motorbike laden with all her belongings. The bike itself is a customized chopper and can be read as an appropriation of a traditionally male symbol of virility. In her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler analyses this kind of representation as an instance of the 'performative' criteria favoured by heteronormative (and its related) ideologies. Specifically, Butler conceptualizes gendered subjectivity as a fluid identity and contends that the individual subject is never exclusively 'male' or 'female,' but rather is always in a state of contextually-dependent flux. That is, gendered subjectivity is not something "fixed" or "essential" but a sustained set of acts, "a repetition and a ritual" (xv). The comic book offers an avenue to challenge patriarchy and postfeminist constructions if Harley rejects the Joker (or any other male partner) and relies upon her female community. However, the comic book's continuous projection of Harley's desire for the Joker (from whom she has separated) disputes and dismantles whatever positive infrastructure was put in place. The comic book contends that women need and desire men no matter whether their attention is reciprocated in any meaningful way.

Fiona Avery's *Amazing Fantasy* released by Marvel Comics in 2004 introduced a Latina Heroine, Araña Corazon (Anya), and it marked a watershed in comic book history. Her real name is Aña Sofia Corazon, but she uses 'Anya' for the ease of pronunciation of others. The first six issues of *Amazing Fantasy*

focus on the context of the story where the readers are informed about Web Corps, Anya's role as Hunter, her ties with Miguel, the importance of the death of her mother in this series, her investigative reporter father and his background, her ties with Spiderman, and more about the enemy organization Sisterhood of the Wasp. Comic book artists rely on certain techniques to enhance the superhero fantasy world for the audience. However, in doing so, characters' bodies are objectified to reveal their superhero strengths. This objectification is especially problematic with regard to the depictions of women characters because it leads to an overt sexualisation of their characters. Although the techniques involve knowledge of muscle groups and comic book traditions, the reader also notices that women's bodies are meant to be on display or objectified in ways different from those for male characters. The tight buttocks, ample breasts, long yet muscular legs, narrow torso, muscular arms, and fuller hips are meant to capture the tough, rugged, beautiful, and 'sexy' women, as Hart discusses in his work *How to Draw Great-Looking Comic Book Women*. Hence, although many of these women (Anya included) have superpowers and skills beyond those of the layperson, their bodies are idealized and objectified in negative ways in the same manner in which women's bodies are presented in magazine advertisements where these are on display and women are "ready for sex" (Hart 7). So the reader has to fight the urge to sexualize the characters and remember that these bodies have been drawn and created for the comic book's fantasy world and that part of the fantasy is the comic book heroine's body. Durham stated that heroines often have their bodies as focal points with a focus on "slenderness and voluptuousness that epitomize current dominant definitions of beauty" (26), and Anya is no exception to this. In fact, Anya has the woman's body type which is often depicted in the media: a narrow waist, fuller hips, ample breasts, lighter skin, and long hair.

The stereotypical representation of sex and race has always been an indispensable aspect of the media. Anya, too, has been represented in similar lines with the projection of her Latina identity. The projection goes further as she differentiates herself from other non-whites and affiliates herself with the other Latinas. Anya prioritises her family over everything but apparently it is the 'workplace' which foregrounds itself as a 'real' family to her. Although she is concerned about her father's well-being, the workplace takes prominence in her life and becomes her 'family,' especially in scenes (where she has spiritual contact with her dead mother) where she creates and sustains connections to her mother through 'conversations' about her mother's death and her own role in avenging that death. It is also at work where she truly connects with other Latinos and begins to build ethnic relationships and expresses her Latina identity. When she finally realises the significance of her heritage, and the roles of her mother and father, she truly emerges as a superheroine; she does not adopt the moniker of 'Spidergirl' (as her peers suggest based on the example of Spiderman) but embraces her mother's maiden name '*Araña*' as her heroic alias.

The multiplicity of ethnic, religious and gendered (mis)representations is most evident in a character called Kamala Khan, the new Ms. Marvel, who was created in 2013 and who started featuring as Ms. Marvel(written by G. Willow Wilson) since February 2014. A Muslim and a Pakistani-American Superheroine, her religious orientation and ethnicity, crafted carefully by Wilson, an American Muslim herself, immediately brings to mind another Sunni Muslim Marvel super heroine, the Afghani-American Sooraya Qadir, known as 'Dust' after her abilities to transform her body into dust particles. A comparison between Kamala Khan and Dust is important here since the representation of Dust, who debuted in 2002, in a post-9/11 America, "is fraught with Orientalist sentiments and a Western male gaze" (Kent 523). With regard to representation of Dust, especially the utilization of the image of the oppressed Muslim girl waiting to be rescued from the clutches of the 'brutish' Afghan men, who do not seem to be able to live in peace, Dar has the following to say:

She is an "oppressed" Muslim girl who was rescued from Afghanistan by Wolverine, a Western male mutant. Wolverine is told that the Taliban were trying to remove Dust's clothes, obviously to molest her, and since there weren't any "good Muslim men" around to take a stand against the Taliban's perverted behavior, who better to rescue her than Wolverine, or rather, "Western democracy? (107)

What is further interesting in the representation of Dust is her costume, which has received considerable critical attention. Although, as Julie Davis and Robert Westerfelhaus has pointed out, in comics "superheroes do not typically dress in ways that signal religious affiliations" (802), Dust chooses to wear an 'abaya' (a long outer garment) and a 'niqab' (a kind of veil), which mark her off as a Muslim woman, adding an exotic dimension to her character. While Dust's agency in choosing her costume is appreciable, the primary reason that she gives for doing so ("protecting herself from men") plays into the Islamophobic stereotype of (Muslim) men being lustful and Islam being a religion which puts harsh restrictions on women in particular. This is nothing but a misrepresentation of the notion of modesty in Islam.

In stark contrast to Dust, Kamala Khan does not wear any 'abaya' (although her Turkish friend, Nakia, does wear a headscarf), and, interestingly, she is differentiated from her conservative, orthodox brother, gesturing towards the fact that Islam is not merely a monolith. Kamala Khan is shown to leave New Jersey in trying to find and gather her lost self and the place she originally belongs to. In a particular story arc, she leaves Jersey feeling unsure about who she is and where she belongs, only to discover that "the missing pieces" in her life "aren't part of a place," but things that she, as a young, super-powered, Pakistani-American woman, has to work out for herself (*Ms. Marvel* 4-5). She discovers that there is no holiday for her and no place of refuge. In Karachi, Kamala Khan is confronted with a situation where she needs to showcase her superheroine stuff to save the situation. Bereft of her superheroine costume, she moves around in red leggings, blue dress and red scarf, part of which is worn as 'hijab' and 'niqab'.

Wilson uses her to give expression to traditional feminist tropes about equality and empowerment, as she negotiates relations with people and institutions on the path to working out who she is and what she wants. Age and the particular forms of discrimination faced by her generation are other central themes in Wilson's writing and Kamala's story. The sensitive case here is Ms. Marvel's gender, as her creator Wilson knows very well. Coming from New Jersey and living in a socio-economic group ordinarily referred to as the working class, Wilson's Ms. Marvel also fights gentrification by property speculators. Ms. Marvel is, then, a young, Muslim woman, a Pakistani-American, and a working-class millennial. In the words of Fixmer and Wood, this represents the "kind of solidarity that incorporates difference while transcending identity politics" (240), or what R. Claire Snyder calls "a dynamic and welcoming politics of coalition" (176). Kamala Khan is portrayed as a successor to Carol Danvers (the original Ms. Marvel). In this context, Kamala has not only to suffer from the imposed roles of gender, race and ethnicity but also from what Harold Bloom calls the 'anxiety of influence', where the identity of her 'self' is put into an unstable state because she has to act keeping the legacy of her precursor, Carol Danvers, in mind. In conclusion, it may be said that although super heroines have often been accused of perpetuating and bolstering certain stereotypes, which a postfeminist world-view may be said to entail, the incorporation of a diverse range of superheroines belonging to different religious, ethnic and sexual orientations (from Wonder Woman, who started her journey in the 1940s, to the postmillennial Dust, America Chavez and Kamala Khan) has also enabled their creators to find a space to challenge many "aesthetic and narrative conventions in superhero comics" (Curtis and Cardo 382).

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## MUSLIN IN THEIR MOUTHS: IDENTIFYING CONFLICT IN SOPHIE MACKINTOSH'S *THE WATER CURE*

**Chaandreyi Mukherjee**

### **Abstract**

Sophie Mackintosh's *The Water Cure* is a story of three sisters living on an isolated island. Conflict and its interrogation provides the premise of the novel which in turn is structured in a post apocalyptic manner with a clear binary between the world of the island (pure, sacred, different) and the outside world (disease ridden, contagious, harmful). Women as narrators, perpetrators, victims and observers claim the island as their home and transform the novel into a particularly female space. Shattering the myth of wholesome sisterhood and powerful female space is the mention of their father, interestingly called the King. What becomes clear is that the creation of the female space is actually the brainchild of the King. Desire- its articulation and repression becomes an important subtext in the novel. This paper would analyze the subtle messages about social conditioning in the novel and the conflicts of gender. This paper would also look into the so called story of Womanhood - its construction, dismantling and assimilation. What would ascertain a dialogue of peace in such a scenario? The resolution of conflict in this case is simultaneously associated with its problematization.

**Keywords :** Feminist dystopia, sisterhood, patriarchy, toxic masculinity, womanhood

*The story of a land where women live at peace with themselves and with the natural world is a recurrent theme of feminist utopias. This is a land where there is no hierarchy, among humans or between humans and animals, where people care for one another and for nature, where the earth and the forest retain their mystery, power and wholeness, where the power of technology and of military and economic force does not rule the earth. (Plumwood 7)*

Plumwood in her introduction to *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* talks about the construction of a binary when referring to the so called female and male spaces- "Gaia and Mars" she calls them. The male space is essentially dominated by technological advancement, unbridled materialism and overwhelming prosperity- reckless in their achievement. This creation of a binary provides the foundation of the conflict in Sophie Mackintosh's novel. *The Water Cure* initiates as a story of three sisters living on an isolated island. Conflict and

its interrogation provides the premise of the novel which in turn is structured in a post apocalyptic manner with a clear binary between the world of the island (pure, sacred, different) and the outside world (disease ridden, contagious, harmful). While discussing female dystopian fiction, Alexandra Alter states:

Most of these new dystopian stories take place in the future, but channel the anger and anxieties of the present, when women and men alike are grappling with shifting gender roles and the messy, continuing aftermath of the MeToo movement. They are landing at a charged and polarizing moment, when a record number of women are getting involved in politics and running for office, and more women are speaking out against sexual assault and harassment. ("How Feminist")

She adds, "Some of the novels are meant to serve as cautionary tales against political inaction and complacency, and as a warning that steps toward women's equality may one day be curtailed" ("How Feminist"). Referring to Alter's comments while reading Mackintosh's novel becomes essential, especially to underline the subtle dystopian undertones of her fiction. The tone and flavour of *The Water Cure* may seem similar to a feminist revision of a patriarchal myth, however, the premise it seeks to project is fundamentally mired in ground realities of the twenty first century. In fact, whatever she writes, the examples she uses to denote the unforgettable gender disparity, are clichéd in their familiarity, and that may very well be intentional. The sustained popularity of feminist dystopias and the explosion of the #MeToo movement undoubtedly point towards the irrefutable fact – the convoluted power which patriarchy maintains is absolute, toxic masculinity is popular and even after decades of struggles, men and women are hardly equal.

In this regard, Sophie Gilbert writes:

Over the last couple of years, though, fiction's dystopias have changed. They're largely written by, and concerned with, women. They imagine worlds ravaged by climate change, worlds in which humanity's progress unravels. Most significantly, they consider reproduction, and what happens when societies try to legislate it. ("The Remarkable Rise")

Mackintosh's novel begins with the declaration of the sudden loss of the father, an all encompassing male figure, predictably called "The King," "Once we had a father, but our father dies without us noticing" (Mackintosh 3). What is interesting is the juxtaposition of the past with the present or the habitual; "dies" almost referring to an everyday death, a habit. The voices of the three sisters converge into one homogenous voice stating, "It is possible we drove him away, that the energy escaped our bodies despite our attempts to stifle it and became a smog clinging around the house, the forest, the beach" (Mackintosh 3). Female desire – its articulation and repression becomes an important subtext in the novel. It becomes interesting to note how the female energy merges the domestic space seamlessly with nature, or in this case the outside – the "smog" clings not just to their home, but stretches on to the forest and beach.

Part of what made the old world so terrible, so prone to destruction, was a total lack of preparation for the personal energies often called *feelings*. Mother told us about these kinds of energies. Especially dangerous for women, our bodies already so vulnerable in ways that the bodies of men are not. (Mackintosh 12)

Through the lessons of their parents, the sisters come to know about the terrifyingly toxic nature of the world that lies outside the realm of their island. Women – victims of abuse, trauma and violence, mostly at the hands of men, frequently turn up at the island. The King is responsible for inventing various “cures” or “treatments” to heal these broken women. The sisters have been taught that women are fundamentally associated with weakness of body, mind and spirit, and the only way to survive is to not let feelings overwhelm you or cloud your judgment.

Strong feelings weaken you, open up your body like a wound. It takes vigilance and regular therapies to hold them at bay. Over the years we have learned how to dampen them down, how to practise and release emotion under strict conditions only, how to own our pain. I can cough it into muslin, trap it as bubbles under the water, let it from my very blood. (Mackintosh 18)

The repression of feelings is maintained through years of continuous brutal physical and psychological abuse interestingly called “therapies” at the hands of their parents. The systematic torture is intended to help strengthen their bodies and minds against the toxins of the outside world. The girls are made to play the “drowning game” and brought to the brink of drowning in the swimming pool. They are stitched into coarse fabrics and made to stand at the overheated saunas till they collapse. Each year, the family performs a ritual, “the drawing of the irons” in which they are randomly assigned a family member to love more than the others, leaving the odd one out to suffer in neglect until the next year. In one of the most disturbing pages of the novel, one of the sisters, Lia, lists the wounds on her body, “Two dark purple fingertips on my left hand, from being submerged in ice...The starburst at the back of my neck where Mother once sewed my skin into the fainting sack...Water mark on my flank. Mother poured the hot kettle on me” (Mackintosh 40). The construction of the so called safe haven for women, the female utopia is manifested through violence on women by women. The so called female utopia is ravaged by patriarchy in which the mother becomes an unwitting agent of toxic masculinity. “Traditionally, women are ‘the environment’—they provide the environment and conditions against which male ‘achievement’ takes place, but what they do is not itself accounted as achievement” (Plumwood 22). The Mother in this case becomes a stronger, more resilient and inflexible parameter of patriarchy, not only providing the space/environment to the man/Father to achieve his dream of utopia, but also believing in his regressive ideas to such an extent as to forget her own identity. What is unique in the novel is the association of repression of feelings with environmental toxicity and accumulation of one’s resilience against it, not with morality. Giving it a scientific edge is trying to fuse it with rationality and reason; a subtle trick in which patriarchy can cherish its unquestioned and unrivaled kingdom.

In an interview, Mackintosh reveals her intention about associating pain with womanhood. She says:

Pain is so often written off in women as overreaction—a specifically female kind of overreaction. I've seen women in my life suffer for years, doubt their own symptoms, say that they do not wish to be seen as melodramatic. Conflating the physical and mental with women leads us to be seen as silly, as unreliable, too often—as attention-seeking rather than as a person suffering deeply. (Le Blanc, "Sophie Mackintosh's")

Mackintosh deliberately chooses to narrate pain and the paraphernalia associated with it. In one of the most perceptive essays questioning the importance of recognizing pain in women, Leslie Jamison writes:

The moment we start talking about wounded women, we risk transforming their suffering from an aspect of the female experience into an element of the female constitution— perhaps its finest, frailest consummation. The ancient Greek Menander once said: "Woman is a pain that never goes away." He probably just meant women were trouble, but his words hold a more sinister suggestion: the possibility that being a woman *requires* being in pain, that pain is the unending glue and prerequisite of female consciousness. (Jamison 3)

She adds:

A 2001 study called "The Girl Who Cried Pain" tries to make sense of the fact that men are more likely than women to be given medication when they report pain to their doctors. Women are more likely to be given sedatives. The study makes visible a disturbing set of assumptions: It's not just that women are prone to hurting— *a pain that never goes away*— but also that they're prone to making it up. The report finds that despite evidence that "women are biologically more sensitive to pain than men... [their] pain reports are taken less seriously." *Less seriously* meaning, more specifically, "they are more likely to have their pain reports discounted as 'emotional' or 'psychogenic' and, therefore, 'not real.' " (Jamison 6)

Mackintosh's womanhood is deliberately fraught with extremes of emotions; the girls 'hyperventilate', 'scream', 'go into hysterics', 'stuff muslin in their mouths to stop feeling pain', 'cut themselves to avoid distress' and others. The physical pain of childbirth is juxtaposed cleverly with the shock of losing the child. What is relevant to note is that, both physical and emotional pain are essential to be acknowledged. It is patriarchy which deems pain purely as an attribute of womanhood.

Women as narrators, perpetrators, victims and observers claim the island as their home and transform the novel into a particularly female space. Shattering the myth of wholesome sisterhood and powerful female space is the idea that the creation of the female space is actually the brainchild of the King. "When the damaged women saw King for the first time they often recoiled. *Man*. But our mother explained that here was a man who had renounced the world...Here was a man who put his women and children first" (Mackintosh 41).

There is a mention of “scream therapy” where the girls would expel gusts of air from their mouths so as to get rid of excess feelings. The King, the man, would have a stick called “conducting baton” and would guide the purge of emotions of the women. The man with his baton would orchestrate the performance of the women. The novel provides important messages about social conditioning, in this particular case, the passive conforming of the women to all the family rituals which are crafted by the Man supposedly to enable the sisters to become more like the traditional description of manhood- rational, cold, repressing emotion, becoming mentally and physically strong enough to harm anyone without thinking.

Mackintosh's novel flows seamlessly as water, the most important metaphor of the novel. Water is essential for survival, part of nature and culture, domesticity and science. Water, the most elemental and intrinsic part of nature is used as a cure to treat broken individuals, in this case, women. Water from nature, being transferred into the realms of domesticity, being used as a medical cure, to heal women who crave peace, safety and comfort from conflict. Water, thus, becomes an unlikely metaphor for identifying, clarifying and prioritizing difference between the two sexes. Water is also symbolic of violence, repression and angst:

We have never been permitted to cry because it makes our energies suffocating. Crying lays you low and vulnerable...If water is the cure for what ails us, the water that comes from your own faces and hearts is the wrong sort. It has absorbed our pain and is dangerous to let loose. *Pathological despair* was the King's way of describing an emergency that needed cloth, confinement, our heads held underwater. (Mackintosh 68)

Water is also what surrounds the island, separating the toxic from the pure, the world of masculine domination and violence on women from the carefully crafted utopia. Water, thus, ironically represents the hollowness of these differences. The world inside the island is equally toxic with subtler and more refined forms of domination of female bodies and minds. Water is the passage to the outer world, through which the King, the provider, makes solo weekly trips to arrange food and sustenance to his family. Water is also the place where the still born baby of one of the girls is released. Life and death are intrinsically associated with the metaphor of water. The fluidity associated with it, stands in stark contrast against the stasis of the lives of the sisters. Water is also the symbol through which the demarcation between the outside male world and the inside female world is diffused, with the entry of the three males into the already conflicted female space.

The washing up of the men on the shore brings in more Shakespearean references into the King Lear-esque narrative of three daughters and a King. However, the world of *The Tempest* finds extremely different versions of power play associated with gender, sexuality and expression of desire- “The men have been watching us...At meals they chew and stare...Maybe they would eat us given half a chance. Anything is possible with these hungry looking men” (Mackintosh

82). Fear and passive aggressive demeanours dominate this section of the novel; the Mother trying to assert her dominance by “protecting” the girls from the men, the men trying every trick possible to initiate amicable relations. Lia’s seduction by Llew unfolds in a breathless pace through traumatic expressions of passion, “My body is a traitor, I am also a traitor,” (Mackintosh 96) gushes Lia with her unrestrained physical and psychological surrender. Her falling in love with the so called “enemy/man” occurs through debasement of herself, profound guilt, angst and confused evocation of a passion repressed for years:

Again I want to hurt him, want to save his life or ruin it, something, anything, I have not decided. I want him to leap for my approval like a fish, body twisting and I want to be the one who dictates the terms, but when I try, small stabbing gestures towards intimacy, he doesn’t react enough. (Mackintosh 144-145)

Llew responds to her baffled adoration with curt statements like, “Don’t cry...I hate it when women cry. It’s manipulative” (Mackintosh 148), “Are you my shadow now?” (Mackintosh 172), “Can you please be normal for a second?” (Mackintosh 184). Lia is sensitive enough to understand the shaming of her need by the man. Female desire never did have any place in patriarchy and have more than often been linked with hysteria. However, Lia is neither equipped to converse about her newly emancipated feelings nor does she find a safe space of acceptance and acknowledgement. “You girls are a new and shining kind of woman,” (Mackintosh 228) King tells them, proudly — after he has raised them vitamin-deficient and weakened by his therapies, and ignorant of basic human biology. They have been told repeatedly that their isolation is a privilege and their ignorance is innocence. But it is increasingly clear to the reader that these young women have simply been raised to fit their patriarch’s ideal of what pure, fragile, privileged womanhood should be.

The eldest daughter, Grace takes over the narration of the final section of the novel. The voices of the sisters which seemed almost unidentifiable in the initial pages, become more different and individualized. The change in tone from Lia’s poignant explorations of sexuality and helpless emotional pain to Grace’s narrative is represented through clarity, rage and understanding. The King is not the biological father of Grace and has impregnated her. The King has sent the men to bring the sisters to the mainland. The King has charted out their lives for them. It is almost necessary that Grace’s narrative unfolds as a monologue addressed to her foster father/lover/father of her dead baby. “Long before the days of the cure, you came for our books...Then you came for our hair...Finally you came for our hearts...They panicked you” (Mackintosh 241). It is interesting to note the trajectory of patriarchy, the domination begins from restriction of knowledge so that the girls unquestioningly accept everything they are told, to the curtailment of their physical selves and finally to the repression of their passions. Grace states, “Love was a great educator...It taught me first of all that women could be enemies too” (Mackintosh 219). She is jealous of the intimacy shared between her mother and the King and even imagines her sisters as competition.

This is exactly what patriarchy tries to accomplish, pitting one woman against others, transforming them into “enemies”. Grace understands the conflicts associated with her Stockholm syndrome situation. In a way she is a captive in the so called utopia constructed by the King. However, in a space which restricts emotions in any form, any show of tenderness, even if incestuous/untoward/inappropriate/sexually deviant can be construed as attachment by the unwitting victim rather than unfiltered lust. Grace is traumatized and tormented by the realization of her own feelings for the King and he in turn relishes and encourages her extreme crisis of identity:

What it was like to be in love with you: fucking awful, even after you revealed it was technically all right. The love of the family magnified. Except I wasn't of your blood. Except you had raised me like your own. Except I knew no other families to compare ours with. It was like having a permanent hangover. A pure, lightning nausea, not unlike how it would later feel to be pregnant. (Mackintosh 227)

She, however, is intelligent enough to see the cracks in the utopia:

We are your property, your rightful goods. Mother was worn out, a liability; I have replaced her. Half her age, body and mind equipped for survival. It is simple. You would explain it to us so reasonably if you were around. We would see it as the only rational act. (Mackintosh 223)

Reason and rationality are the tools which patriarchy glorifies in order to establish itself against the so called irrational hysteria of womanhood as is the transformation of women into commodities, used, maintained and exchanged as per their value.

Perhaps more a tale of patriarchal family structures taken to an extreme — the father as both predator and god, the mother a collaborator who occasionally protects, all three daughters hovering in a limbo somewhere between cherished possessions and future concubines for the patriarch. (Jemisin, “Three Sisters”)

It is definitely a story about Womanhood - its construction, dismantling and assimilation. Unfortunately, here too, the women are either inferior puppets, or superior samurais killing men and refabricating a new female space. Women are never equal to men, men are never blameless.

*The Water Cure* is not a simple book. It unspools ideas around solidarity and sisterhood, danger and gender, and the ways that families become their own toxic ecosystems. It takes that original, irreducible problem named in Genesis and asks it in a way that incorporates this increasingly prevalent idea of toxic masculinity and both gives it credence and names its limitations. *The Water Cure* doesn't, of course, offer a solution to that problem. But it does show us, in the bond between Lia, Grace, and Sky, that we have at least one tool not available to Eve back at the beginning of the world: sisterhood. (Quinn, “The Water Cure”)

The acknowledgement, recognition and acceptance of the new reality by the sisters lead to the formulation of a new and more vibrant sisterhood — very different from the coerced, tragic and manipulative sister-love propagated by

their parents. This sisterhood is maintained through difference and divergence rather than homogeneity. The sisters perceive each other as complete individuals, not faceless shadows of each other. Together they embrace the liberation of a stifling utopia and commence an optimistic journey toward future growth. What makes this hopeful decision problematic is that the emancipation of women is carried on the complete annihilation of men. It is only when each of the three men are dead, that the power of the King over the sisters lessen. The novel is filled with testimonies from grieving/traumatized women who narrate the violence on their bodies and selves by men. In a way, sisterhood seems possible only when manhood is absent. Discussing the range and variety of contemporary speculative fiction, especially written by women and about women, Sophia Gilbert states:

The conventional thinking on dystopian fiction is that it serves as both a comfort and a warning. Speculative stories point to how much worse things could be, but also how much worse they could get. They remind readers of the stunning breadth of human frailty. We see the world distorted, sometimes beyond recognition, and it prompts us to look at our own reality from different angles. *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood told me in 2017, is just a mashup of elements taken from different moments in history. Nothing was invented. Nothing was inconceivable, because everything had already happened in one country or another. ("The Remarkable Rise")

*The Water Cure* is a glaring reminder of the excruciating realities of the present day, of the distortions of feminism and the inescapable violence associated with it. In an interview with Rhiannon Cosslett, Mackintosh states:

There are so many things happening at the moment, such as #MeToo and the abortion referendum. It shows that women's bodies are still very much up for debate. I read an article that said that dystopian feminism was 'a big trend', and I thought, 'It might be a trend, but it's also our lives.' ("Dystopian Feminism")

*The Water Cure* is Mackintosh's way of imagining a world which is essentially problematic in itself. "Can a reign of women possibly be the answer to the earth's destruction and to all the other related problems? Is ecofeminism giving us another version of the story that all problems will cease when the powerless take over power? Is ecofeminism inevitably based in gynocentric essentialism?" (Plumwood 8). This female utopia verges close to a dystopia, something more problematic than the simplistic notion of patriarchy. Toxic femininity is almost as equally reductive and regressive as toxic masculinity. *The Water Cure* emerges as a relevant, undeniable question, both subtle and vehement. It is simultaneously a plea and an admonishment addressed to the human kind to acknowledge and rectify their limitless capabilities of violence and destruction. It becomes the prerogative of the human beings to stall the bleakness and horrifying vision of future.

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## **ALTERED STATES: A READING OF CESAR AIRA'S *AN EPISODE IN THE LIFE OF A LANDSCAPE PAINTER***

**Mubashir Karim**

### **Abstract**

Travelling, in one form or the other, has always been associated with self-discovery. Travel writings from the ancient times to the present have mostly been written in order to make the readers aware about the customs, history and peculiar intrinsic notions of a particular culture. From a sociological point of view, a travel memoir, then, becomes a valuable combination, a hodgepodge whereby the reader could discern either his/ her conservative or progressive views. The element of self-discovery often associated with travel writings then also comes into question as we, the readers, try to locate the elements and locales that change the attitude of our travel writer. In his novella, *An Episode in the Life of a Landscape Painter*, Cesar Aira, while bringing in a real historical personality of a German painter and his adventures in search of a “physiognomic totality” places the real travelling experience against a fictional one. As Aira describes his protagonist’s travels through the ‘strange’ landscape of Latin America, he not only makes a point about the painter’s reflections of the land but also comments on the notion of the new land as a new-discovery for the painter. Throughout the novella, Latin America’s landscape becomes a metaphor for altering states of the painter (both artistically and bodily), rather than his protagonist’s clichéd notion of self-discovery and notions of art. This paper attempts to read Aira’s novella in the light of this hackneyed notion of self-discovery and a painter’s incessant efforts to attain the same. It also tries to analyse how the novella problematizes the notion of representation through Aira’s usage of language that seems at times laced with humour, history and ambiguity.

**Keywords :** Cesar Aira, travel, representation, history, alexander von Humboldt, colonialism.

“We travel, initially,” writes Pico Iyer, “to lose ourselves; and we travel, next, to find ourselves” (“Why we Travel”). For it is in the act of losing that a search for oneself commences. He further writes: We travel, then, in search of both self and anonymity — and, of course, in finding the one we apprehend the other. Travelling usually, in one form or the other, has always been associated with self-discovery. Cesar Aira’s novella *An Episode in the Life of a Landscape Painter* picks up the notion of travelling, in connection with a real life painter from Germany to South America, and pits him against his own idiosyncrasies

about the land and the nature of art. The accident or the episode of the title that happens not only bodily disfigures him but alters his representational impression of the whole land. As the novella ostensibly refers to the physiognomic theory of Alexander Von Humboldt, it thereby, also brings in the imperialistic agenda of the 'civilized' people trying to comprehend the New Land. The paper tries to read the novella not only as a travelogue of the outside world but of the inside as well. The representation, thus, takes place not only of the alteration of the bodily shape, in relation to the protagonist only, but spills over to the very act of altering the internal mechanism of the people represented thereof.

Travel writings, from the ancient times to the present, have mostly been written in order to make the readers aware about the myriad customs, culture, history and peculiar intrinsic notions of a land travelled to. The act on the part of the writer to look for moments which for him become reference points for the place he/she is visiting, inform us not only as readers about the place but also about the writer's peculiar insight. From a sociological point of view, a travel memoir, then, becomes a valuable combination, a hodgepodge of conservative or progressive views. These views could sometimes even take on the "religious theme of soul's journey" (Gould 14) where the mystical other and the personal converge. The element of self-discovery, often associated with travel writings, then also, comes into question, as we, the readers, try to locate the elements and locales that change the attitude of the traveller.

With the onset of post-colonial studies on the literary scene, it has come into perspective that travel narratives with their emphasis on locating the newer lands on the global map, directly or indirectly, helped colonial powers in their greed for newer markets and raw material. What becomes pertinent here is to understand that these travel narratives came with their own modes of representation. Whether it is Christopher Columbus' description of the Caribbean in the past or the various government funded news channels or newspapers' coverage of 'unravelling' certain tourist destinations at present, it is not hard to discern the propaganda inherent. The representation of Latin America as a new land has made theorists and critics to comment that "[t]ravel and the construction of American identity are intimately linked" (Hamera and Bendixen 1) and thereby posit fundamental points whereby the idea of representation can be located. Most of the travel narratives represent their 'Other' with inclinations that tend to be "steeped in imperialist attitudes and imagery" (Thompson 137).

At the very beginning of the novel we are made aware about the physiognomic theories of Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859), a reference to a real explorer and geographer, whom our protagonist Johann Moritz Rugendas holds in high regard in relation to his craft. What is important to note is the fact that the real Humboldt still remains "most influential interlocutor in the process of reimagining and redefinition that coincided with Spanish America's independence from Spain" and the one who was originally responsible for the "ideological reinvention of South America" (Pratt 111). Humboldt's physiognomic theory holds that nature works in certain ways that are beyond the knowledge of

science and can only be captured and understood through art. For him, writes a critic, "Archaeological research must take into account climate and soil, the presence or absence of animals, the physiognomy of plants and of landforms, for they all influence the progress and style of human arts." (Walls 7). It was through the composing of this type of physiognomy, the 'face of the earth' that, for Humboldt, would make a difference between the conception of the old world and the new one. As such, it encompasses, "the peculiar physiognomy and conformation of the land, the features of the landscape, the ever-varying outline of the clouds" where the "nature interpenetrates mind." It is only through the medium of art, held Humboldt that can "make present to the senses and the imagination the fundamental experience of contemplating nature in its wholeness" (Walls 225-226). Cesar Aira, in his novel, uses this particular idea of the representation of the New World as the total impression of the land, people, vegetation, seasons, customs, and manners an essential part of his narration. This "... new graphic form of representation ..." is portrayed in the novel as the means to not only to depict the totality of this new exotic land outside but inwards as well through the effect of this land on the personality of a character like Rugendas. It is therefore not difficult, for us as readers, to link the representations of the German painter's obsession with the idea of representing the natives while keeping intact their personal prejudices. However, Aira goes further than this redundant binary of the enlightened traveller describing the native by carefully choosing this representative to be an artist, a painter. An artist who at various points in the novel comes out as genuine and sincere and is obsessed at discovering "the other side of his art." (Episode 147)

In the novella, *An Episode in the Life of a Landscape Painter*, César Aira, while bringing real historical personalities of Johann Moritz Rugendas, or Alexander von Homboldt among others, and his adventures in search of a "physiognomic totality" juxtaposes the real travelling experience with the fictional. As Aira describes his protagonist's travels through the strange landscape of Latin America, he not only is making a point about the painter's reflections of the land but also commenting on the notion of the 'new-land' as a 'new-discovery' for the painter. Throughout the novella, Latin America's landscape becomes a metaphor for the inexplicable, strange environment and poses questions for the clichéd notion of self-discovery.

The complexity of the narrative becomes evident when in middle of the novella, Cesar Aira, inserts a little apparently out of place anecdote to the story he is narrating. Aira writes:

Imagine a brilliant police detective summarizing his investigations for the husband of the victim, the widower. Thanks to his subtle deductions he has been able to "reconstruct" how the murder was committed; he does not know the identity of the murderer, but he has managed to work out everything else with an almost magical precision, as if he had seen it happen. And his interlocutor, the widower, who is, in fact, the murderer, has to admit that the detective is a genius, because it really did happen exactly as he says; yet at

the same time, although of course he actually saw it happen and is the only living eyewitness as well as the culprit, he cannot match what happened with what the policeman is telling him, not because there are errors, large or small, in the account, or details out of place, but because the match is inconceivable, there is such an abyss between one story and the other, or between a story and the lack of a story, between the lived experience and the reconstruction (even when the reconstruction has been executed to perfection) that widower simply cannot see a relation between them; which leads him to conclude that he is innocent, that he did not kill his wife. (*Episode 216*)

The anecdote can easily be labelled a distraction from the main course of event but effortlessly sneaks in the idea of representation, that is, the idea of how precarious the acts of narration or representation can become. Reading the anecdote in relation to the main story of our novella, we are being asked to question the representations of the foreign land of Americas by the German Painter. Aira's narrative about these painters may want us to exonerate them of the sins of representation as they are striving for nothing but a proper, scientific art but it is simultaneously the very narrative that makes us aware about it. Just as the killer in the anecdote after hearing the meticulous narration of the crime concludes that he is innocent, in almost the same manner, the painters' act of representing with scientific precision the 'strange' land of Latin America turns out to be a crime that they cannot commit. Perhaps, it is this convergence between 'a story and the lack of a story, between the lived experience and the reconstruction', that Aira's narrative focuses upon. In other words, the story that Aira narrates and the one that remains unsaid as the novella ends, or what the painter fails to represent, is basically the story of the novel. Representation here, in the novella, is to be taken, in what a critic writes as an exploration "of a world at the boundaries of 'civilization,'" something "that has not (yet) been domesticated by European signification or codified in detail by its ideology", and is therefore, "perceived as uncontrollable, chaotic, unattainable and ultimately evil . . ." (Jan Mohamed 18). Rugendas and his aide, as characters and as real figures, trudging the New World, in search of a heightened sense of art are actually trying to represent through their art a world where the people and the land are in sync with one another; if the one is unattainable so would the other be. It is with this idea in mind that the painter sets out to capture the new land in its totality and later comes to question whether anything of that sort could ever be represented.

On the surface level, the novella narrates the story of one real painter Rugendas, who along with his friend and companion Robert Krause, visits Latin America in order to capture the "physiognomic totality" of the land. While capturing the seeming harmony of the nature, Rugendas suffers an accident when he is struck twice by lightning in the pampas and is dragged by the horse which leaves the distinct features of his face utterly disfigured. Aira titles the novella on the same episode and tends to draw the various subsequent actions of Rugendas' which imply how the episode changes his perception of art and the act of

representation. The thing to be noted here is the fact that Aira bases the story of his novella on the letters which Rugendas wrote to his various friends and family members. The whole narration of the novel can best be described as a fictional documentation of the various real life correspondences that actually happened in Rugendas' lifetime. Aira leaves no stone unturned to convince the reader that the story he is presenting is what actually occurred.

Furthermore, Aira infuses the story with his subtle nuances of humour and timely allusions, at regular intervals, presenting the painters in their own light, that is, the prejudices and cultural baggage that people carry with them while travelling. Quite humorously, Aira infuses the story with the German painter's prejudice regarding the Indian culture as a focal point where the intelligence and the stupidity of these foreign people in a strange land is commented upon. The German painter has this strange obsession for the depiction of two things in particular, one, he wants to capture the moment of the earthquake and second the Indian raids that occur. Aira skilfully recounts the painter's obsession with these things in a distanced manner typically bordering on sarcasm. Throughout his travels, our painter keeps "secretly hoping" (*Episode 162*) for the earthquake to shake up the strange land, irrespective of the fact that it can put, particularly locals, in danger, so that he can depict the strangeness of the moment as accurately as possible. In this connection, Rugendas even inquires the people from a distinctive professional outlook about the "premonitory signs of seismic activity" to which "dogs spat, chickens pecked at their own eggs, ants swarmed, plants flowered" one hour before the quake seems quite an apt response. Furthermore, the protagonist concludes that an "equally abrupt and gratuitous changes" (*Episode 162*) could easily be anticipated for an Indian Raid - something which he secretly yearns to happen. The anticipation of the protagonist for these equally violent episodes to materialize so that his visit to this far away mysterious land doesn't fall short of his "personal myth of Argentina" (163) he has constructed, is presented as marking points where the age old knowledge/power nexus is put in action.

There is no doubt that the relationship between art and life, of people travelling to newer lands, the act of being an artist in times of crisis form some important themes on which the novel rests its idea. Representation however takes a centre stage in connection with the novella. Throughout the novel, Aira plays with the notion of representation from the perspective of the painters who are bent upon using a scientific approach of physiognomy to capture the Indians that populate the land. The depiction of the Indian Uprising that the painter gets the chance to paint, after the accident, is depicted in a manner which combines the sincere with the ridiculous. Both the painters follow the raid of the Indians so as to depict the various stages of the uprising. To the Germans, the Indians seem to defy any depiction as they seem not to "care about the laws of gravity" and possessed a "circus-like" quality in their "performance" (*Episode 212*). This kind of depiction would, for the painter be impossible to depict in a static composition and hence the painters would need to put, to 're-present' the so called

performance in the rightful manner or as Aira puts it:

Rugendas would have to rectify them on paper, to make them plausible in the context of a static composition. But in his sketches the rectification was incomplete, so traces of their real strangeness remained, archaeological traces in a sense, because they were overlaid and obscured by speed. (*Episode 212*)

The arrival of the Indian Uprising on the planes, something which our painter was secretly hoping for, is depicted as a form of compensation by the nature towards the painter who had sacrificed his own physiognomy to depict these strange lands. The life of Rugendas prior to the accident is narrated as something quite opposite to the one he then leads – a world where even the tiny things are not irrelevant to the whole cosmos, a world where the “afternoon was not a repetition of the morning, not even in reverse” but a place where “[t]hings simply happened, and the afternoon turned out to be different from the morning, with its own adventures, discoveries and creations” (*Episode 220-221*). By these narratives, what comes to the forefront is Rugendas’ altered state of mind about art and life in the face of his altered physicality. He is depicted as a person who is ready to give it all despite his poor physical and mental health. He is depicted as someone who after facing near-death experience is ready to take all chances to make this rebirth a success.

The notion of the body in relation to his travel becomes the primary focus of the novella then. Aira incorporates the element of mind, sense and aesthetic in the title of the book by invoking Rugendas as a painter but, as the novella progresses, it is the body of the painter that becomes the site of landscaping, his face – a canvas of representation. What is pertinent to put here is the fact that body has always been instrumental in travels and travelogues. The fact that body, in all its vulnerability, becomes the primary vehicle put out there to confront the unknown is to be taken note of. It is the corporeality of the body, as against the mind, that determines and differentiates the success and the failure of travelling in the first place. As a critic puts it:

To differing degrees, by foregrounding the role of corporeality in the journey, accounts of both disability and illness highlight and challenge the diverse and often unpredictable forms that travel may continue to adopt in an age of mechanization and apparently ever-increasing acceleration. They disrupt perceptions of the standardization and sanitization of the travel experience, reveal the ways in which the body in motion may engage in very different ways with its surroundings, and invite reflection on the borderline between mobility and immobility. Perhaps most significantly, cases in which the body fails to operate according the ways in which society or the individual expects permit the reintegration of contingency into the journey and its textualization. (Forsdick 75)

As such, it is the body that turns out to be a prime medium through which an understanding, composition, and the overall perception of the place is prepared. In other words, it is the altering phases of the environment and the

altered state of the protagonist, as the accident takes place that body is made central to the narrative. It is his altering/disfigurement of the body that Rugendas becomes aware of the varying degrees of power of nature over man and subtly questions the validity of theories like those of Humboldt. Perhaps that is why Aira writes that “[i]n the beginning was Repetition” (Aira 225), a notion which the physiognomically driven Rugendas was never able to appreciate. This is a repetition of a different order – a repetition of an altered state. Through his near death experience Rugendas is able to appreciate the vast incomprehensibility of nature and proceeds to embraces it gradually. When the altered Rugendas takes upon himself the task of depicting the Indian uprising at the cost of his health, perhaps the one thing which gives him the courage to go further is the face of death he has seen. In his altered state, he ruminates on his artistic death, the fact that his travel to this far away land won’t come to fruition if he doesn’t paint anything of value. Aira writes:

The artist, as artist, could always be already dead. There was something absurd about trying to preserve his life. An accident, big or small, could kill a man, or a thousand, or a thousand million men at once. If night were lethal, we would all die shortly after sunset. Rugendas might have thought, as people often do: “I have lived long enough,” especially after what had happened to him. Since art is eternal, nothing is lost. (*Episode 226-27*)

The question of representation returns to the narrative as the Indian Uprising actually takes place. As Rugendas, with his mantilla on, enters the big feast of the Indians and starts to draw Aira inserts the passage with the following lines:

They did not even notice what he was doing: all they could see was him. They would never have been able to guess why he was there. How could they know that there was such a thing as a procedure for the physiognomic representation of nature, a market hungry for exotic engravings, and so on? They did not even know that there was an art of painting, and although they possessed that art in some different, equivalent form, they could not establish the equivalence. (*Episode 228*)

This deliberate contrast of the local people with this ‘monster’, who, under the effect of opium, is attempting untiringly to depict the people as they actually are, problematizes the narrative. Along with this, Aira emphasises on the ignorance of the local people about the great art of painting and “a market hungry for exotic engravings” (*Episode 228*) which again puts the whole question of representation on its head. The Indians here, quite unconsciously, act as models for the European monster to depict them in all their bawdy aura.

Throughout the novella, Argentina is presented as a land of opportunities for the painters – a land which is “mysterious” for the painters, something which can help Rugendas “discover the other side of . . . art” (*Episode 147*). Aira also makes use of certain cultural distinctions of the German Painters and that of Indians living in Latin America. It seems Aira’s effort to write, re-write the story of painters seems two fold. On the one hand, while taking a historical person into

account, he wants to present the actual story as it happened devoid of any subjective opinions, on the other by doing so he accurately comments, perhaps criticizes, the German painter's notion of Latin America as an exotic land populated by devils. While as Aira regularly emphasizes Rugendas' scientific influences from Humboldt, and his idea of representing the land as accurately as possible, he simultaneously takes into account the various cultural attitudes this so called scientific mind cannot bare itself of. The act of travelling by the painters to this exotic land is taken as an important means to redefine the various nuances of the strange land the travel to which falls nothing short of regarding it as a "suicide" (*Episode 155*). Here, to reiterate, the figure of a painter/ artist problematizes this seemingly clichéd binaries, thereby throwing light not only on what art is but also on the notion of who an artist could be.

In his thought-provoking essay on the same novel, Bett Levison also points out to the myriad political nuances that come up with the idea of representing the other where he writes:

Latin American postcolonial studies, like postcolonial studies in general, concentrates on four matters, though a given analysis, obviously, does not necessarily examine all four at once: how the West objectifies in representing the indigenous; how this objectification yields to the actual disasters of colonialism (for, if the indigenous are indeed objects, they can be destroyed rightfully and guiltlessly); the ways in which the indigenous represent themselves as political subjects; and the manners in which the latter representations are prevented from entering the scene of knowledge, because the forms of indigenous expression and reason have been wiped out by colonialism, capitalism, or both. (66)

Aira begins the tale in an ordinary Dickensian fashion when he at length talks about the heritage and the parentage of his protagonist. From the clock making trade of his great grandfathers to the act of painting, Rugendas' life is being traced as ordinarily as possible. Aira presents Rugendas' great-grandfather Georg Philip Rugendas becoming the founder of the dynasty of painters by a mere accident. While losing his right hand as a young man Philip makes himself learn the art of painting. The incorporation of the act of turning to painting by an accident can easily be related to the act of our protagonist's deep reflections on the totality of nature after being hit by lightning. Aira quite humorously could be pointing to the fact of a dynasty of painters as accidental painters. In other words, does an artist become an actual artist only when the cycle of nature mutilates them physically? Is it necessary for an artist to throw away the materiality of his body away so as to arrive at an enlightened/ spiritual oneness of his being? Questions like these form an essential part of Aira's narrative. The fact that the novella does not have a proper/ moral/ final ending then comes as no surprise.

At one point in the novel, Rugendas introspects the general notion of a travelling painter to strange lands and the almost possible failure it can bring:

All the people he came across, in cities or villages, in the jungle or the mountains, had indeed managed to keep going one way or another, but they

were in their own environments; they knew what to expect, while he was at the mercy of fickle chance. How could he be sure that the physiognomic representation of nature would not go out of fashion, leaving him helpless and stranded in the midst of a useless, hostile beauty? . . . Poverty and destitution would simply be another episode. He might end up begging for alms at the door of a South American church. (*Episode 159-60*)

This depiction of the contrast between the world-of-art pursuits against the vast real world of nature is presented as ‘possible failure’ for the artist. Aira expertly conjures up the image of the honest painter’s obsession of depicting the nature of the unknown territory he treads upon, only to find later in that he himself is nothing but part of it, subject to its erratic intricacies.

After the titular episode that our protagonist goes through, he is able to convince himself that the notion of art that he held so dearly may be subject to change and that now that his personal physiognomic appearance has changed drastically he could see the world in a different light. In other words the philosophy of nature where all the facets of the land including climate, vegetation, and people live in harmony as heterocosm may not be that accurate a theory. The events that materialize after the lightening episode change the ideas of the protagonist to a different motive where he is simultaneously portrayed as a victim but also as a survivor. After the event, Rugendas looks at life and art from a different perspective where the element of repetition takes a prime importance. Aira writes:

An artist always learns something from the practice of his art, even in the most constraining circumstances, and in this case Rugendas discovered an aspect of the physiognomic procedure that had so far escaped his notice. Namely that it was based on repetition: fragments were reproduced identically, barely changing their location in the picture. If this was not immediately obvious, not even to the artist, it was because the size of the fragments varied enormously, from a single point to a panoramic view . . . In addition, the fragment’s outline could be affected by perspective. (*Episode 184-85*)

It is because of these very artistic themes, along with the considerable subtle references to Colonial representations that the novel becomes a “drama of perception, of man’s endless struggle for order, whether search for an underlying system to the universe or in the attempt to force order upon it, not through science, but art” (Lewis 136). Rugendas’ self-discovery comes at the cost of mutilation in a strange land – where he understands a “fragment’s relationship to totality” (Fonseca 51) as our protagonist remains “absorbed in his work” (*Episode 229*) and “oblivious to the rest” (*Episode 230*) at the end as he goes on drawing the intricacies of the raid while Krause keeps gazing at him. In other words, the totality of the land couldn’t be appreciated unless and until the singularity of the one, of the part is sacrificed, given over, lost to the seemingly intelligible world out there.

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## **GENDER AND DISGUISE: REPRESENTATION OF BACHA POSH IN NADIA HASHMI'S ONE HALF FROM THE EAST AND THE PEARL THAT BROKE ITS SHELL**

**Mridula Kashyap**

### **Abstract**

The notion of *bacha posh* refers to the cross-dressing of a girl as a boy which is deployed as a way of disguising gender roles. It is a cultural practice that was widespread in Afghanistan and parts of Pakistan whereby girls were raised as boys during their childhood till they attain the age of puberty so that they could have access to educational opportunity, mobility, economic and public spaces from which they were being deprived because of their gender. But can such cross-dressing truly allow girls to receive the benefits of patriarchy—the freedom that is limited only for the dominant gender? Is the disguise of gender role a means of empowerment for girls or a form of oppression? Is freedom only a kind of illusion? Keeping these questions in mind, the paper will examine the practice of *bacha posh* as depicted in Nadia Hashmi's novels. One can argue that while *bacha posh* is practised with a purpose of liberating the girls from the codes of restriction and subjugation attached to the female body, it further complicates the subject position of the person who disguises into *bacha posh*. *Bacha posh* is never a liberating force, rather it reflects the sordid position of the female body in a socio-cultural space. This is due to the gender dysphoria experienced by the *bacha posh* as a result of the incongruity between biological sex and the masculine gender role that the girls have to perform.

**Keywords :** Bacha posh, Gender dysphoria, subjectivity, body, masculinity

*Masculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals. Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting.*

*(Connell and Messerschmidt 836)*

The idea of *bacha posh* is one of the constructions of masculinity and the product of rigid patriarchy where there is a complex interplay between the body and the social system that eventually leads to perplexing ideas of sexuality and gender identity. Women's body and space in Afghanistan have been caught up in

the mire of the turbulent history of state-society relations, the economic situation and the discontent between religious and political status quo that has led to unequal gender relations and dominant modes of 'hegemonic masculinity'<sup>1</sup>. These states of affairs have had their impact over women's mobility, dress code and sexuality. The oppressive state apparatus allows men to police women's mobility thereby constraining their space in the Afghan society. The Mujahideen regime (1992-1996) and the Taliban regime (1996-2001) have established hegemonic masculinity that legitimizes the subordination of women, specifically the latter institutionalizes gender inequality and policing of women's mobility to the extent that they could not enter the public space without being accompanied by a *mahram* (male relative). Restriction of women to enter the public space also limits their economic opportunities and their ability to access public services. Masculine dominance becomes normative in every institution. In the family, the birth of a boy child becomes the most essential and women are held responsible for giving birth to boys. Associated with the importance of the birth of a boy child or the presence of a male member in the family is the question of economic productivity as girls/women are debarred from that space. Jenny Nordber in her seminal work on *bacha posh* entitled *The Underground Girls of Kabul: The Hidden Lives of Afghan Girls Disguised as Boys* (2014) claims that every Afghan family must have at least one son, without which the family would be considered incomplete, weak and vulnerable. So, every Afghan married woman is obliged to bear a son and it becomes her sole purpose in life, failing to do so she is stigmatized as *dokhtar zai* or "she who only brings daughters" and her husband, in turn, is defamed as *mada post* or "he whose woman will only deliver girls." Thus, in a society where hegemonic masculinity prevails, it is the woman who always becomes accountable for the failure to bear the boy child. Against this backdrop of masculine dominance and absence of space for the woman that the custom of *bacha posh* develops. The notion of *bacha posh* refers to the cross-dressing of the girl as a boy which is deployed as a way of disguising gender roles. It is a cultural practice that was widespread in Afghanistan and parts of Pakistan whereby girls were raised as boys during their childhood till they attain the age of puberty so that they could have access to educational opportunity, mobility, economic and public spaces from which they were being deprived because of their gender. But can such cross-dressing truly allow girls to receive the benefits of patriarchy—the freedom that is limited only for the dominant gender? Is the disguise of gender role a means of empowerment for girls or a form of oppression? Is freedom only a kind of illusion? Keeping these questions in mind, the paper will examine the practice of *bacha posh* as depicted in Nadia Hashmi's novels. One can argue that while *bacha posh* is practised with a purpose of liberating the girls from the codes of restriction and subjugation attached to the female body, it further complicates the subject position of the person who disguises into *bacha posh*. *Bacha posh* is never a liberating force, rather it reflects the sordid position of the female body in a socio-cultural space. This is due to the gender dysphoria experienced by the *bacha posh* as a result of the incongruity between biological sex and the masculine gender role that the girls have to

perform.

These issues and complexities associated with the custom of *bacha posh*, set against the backdrop of a perplexing Afghan history, are intricately interwoven by Nadia Hashmi in her novels *One Half from the East* (2016) and *The Pearl that Broke its Shell* (2014). In both the novels, Hashmi exposes the vulnerability of woman as a result of the rigid patriarchal structure that has constrained their lives altogether. Obayda in *One Half of the East* is made into a boy with the belief that she would bring good luck to the family and also render economic support because of her father's wretched condition when he loses one of his legs in a bomb explosion. After the catastrophe, the family shifts from the city of Kabul to a small village where Obayda is compelled by her mother and her aunt to cross-dress as a boy and take up the new identity of Obayd. This new identity at the age of ten leaves her in a baffled state as she was always comfortable being a girl. She realizes that she could not fit into the straitjacket of any of the gender roles and suffers from a kind of gender dysphoria. Hence, the novel centers on Obayda's labyrinthine quest for identity as the *bacha posh* identity that is thrust upon her does in no way liberate her, further it aggravates her dilemma and leads her to an abyssal position. In *The Pearl that Broke its Shell*, Hashmi intertwines the intergenerational tales of two Afghan women who had to change their gender roles under different circumstances. Like Obayda, Rahima is made into a boy so that she could access the benefits of patriarchy and support the family as she has no brothers and left with a father who self-medicates with opium. Rahima adores her *bacha posh* life as it provides her with the opportunity to relish the fruits of patriarchy which are otherwise denied to girls because of their gender. However, the freedom that Rahima enjoys is cut short when her opium-addict father arranges her marriage with an elderly and powerful warlord in exchange for a huge bride-price and the supply of opium. At once Rahima's life metamorphoses from a carefree *bacha posh* to the fourth wife of Abdul Khaliq, the warlord. Hashmi juxtaposes the story of Rahima with her great-great-grandmother Shekiba, born a century ago, who had to perform the role of a boy and work in the farm after the cholera epidemic killed her mother and the other siblings. As Shekiba was Herculean build, she was also assigned the job of a guard in King Habibullah's harem, dressed as a man. *The Pearl that Broke its Shell* projects how Rahima and Shekiba break up from their claustrophobic gender identities to adopt a variation that would provide them liberation, only to realize that such liberation is simply an illusion and therefore, the quest for their identities continue.

Though the body of literature produced in this area is limited, yet there are a few fiction writers apart from Hashmi, who has dealt with the practice of *bacha posh* in their works. Canadian writer and activist Deborah Ellis' acclaimed novel, *The Breadwinner* (2001), is about an eleven-year-old girl Parvana who has to become a *bacha posh* in the land of Kabul where "bombs had been part of Parvana's whole life" (11). When the Taliban militia has confiscated the land and asserted their hegemony, Parvana's father is arrested, her education is stopped

and in the absence of any male member, there is none to run the family. Under such circumstances Parvana is cross-dressed as a boy so that she could become the breadwinner of the family, "As a boy, you'll be able to move in and out of the market, buy what we need and no one will stop you..." (27). The novel, thus, captures Parvana's struggle not only to search her father but also to sustain her family. Ukmina Manoori's memoir *I am a Bacha Posh: My Life as a Woman Living as a Man in Afghanistan* (2014) narrates her story of undaunted determination in her decision to remain a *bacha posh* throughout her life, resisting family and social pressures of resuming to womanhood after puberty. Once a *bacha posh* is on the brink of womanhood, she is expected to discard her man's clothing and take recourse to veil and think about her marriage. Ukmina writes:

At this age, the other girls veiled themselves. Those who had, like me, lived their childhood as a boy, gave up their shalwar kameez and the freedom that it conferred, little by little. They abandoned their fields and their games to integrate into the framework of their whole life from this point forward: the walls of their home. They learned how to sew, take care of the children, help their mothers. It took a few months before they embraced their destiny as women: at twelve years old, they wore burqas and did not leave the house anymore without the presence of a man. (15)

However, Ukmina decides to deviate from such social norms and destine her life for the cause of her country by waging war against the Soviets, entering into politics and working diligently for the upliftment of the rights of the Afghan woman. Alike Ukmina, Maria Toorpakai is another valiant figure whose *A Different Kind of Daughter: The Girl Who Hid from the Taliban in Plain Sight* (2016) is a sports memoir where she narrates her harrowing journey as a *bacha posh* to become an athlete hailing from an oppressive region of Pakistan called Waziristan, dominated by the Talibans. Toorpakai's father always considers her to be a "different kind of daughter" (7) as he could perceive that she is a born athlete. She loathed dolls and wearing fancy dresses, instead preferred boy's clothing and playing outside in the dirt which "in my part of the world, for a girl to venture out uncovered was *haram*— forbidden, a sin against God" (7). In her part of the country women playing squash or any other sports is considered *haram*. But squash is not simply a sport for her, but a matter of life and death: "It's not about playing anymore, Maria. It's about staying alive" her father tells her (164). It is only through adopting the role of a *bacha posh* or in other words, masquerading as a boy, that Maria Toorpakai was able to escape the death threats of the Talibans and flee to Canada to pursue her dream.

The word *bacha posh* etymologically means 'dressed as a boy' which is Dari origin. The transformation of the gender identity of girls is decided by the parents at a very tender age, often at birth. As decided by the parents, the girls have to perform the assigned gender role till the time of puberty which is considered to be their marriageable age. Although the community members are aware that the *bacha posh* children are born as girls, but they treat them according to their role-

performance. As Nordberg writes : “These girls are hidden, and that is exactly the point. To everyone on the outside, they are just *bachas*” (48). But as they grow older and reach the age of puberty, their role-playing becomes difficult to sustain, although some *bacha posh* refuse to revert to their biological gender identity. The practise of *bacha posh* developed against the backdrop of a hegemonic masculine society where “men have all the privileges” (61). Among the various reasons discussed by Nordberg in her book *The Underground Girls of Kabul* for the practice of disguising girls as boys in Afghanistan are the predominantly patrilineal structure where sons are more valued than daughters, the social stigma a family has to experience for having no son and the pressure perpetuated upon families to bear at least one son. Because of such social stigma and pressure girls are masqueraded as boys soon after their birth, and the hoax sons are considered to be better than having no sons. There is also a superstitious belief that the *bacha posh* in the family would bring good luck to the future birth of boys in the family. As it is believed that “through visual manifestation, when a woman looks at the image of a male child every day, her body will eventually conceive a son” (69). Thus, till the birth of the actual son, the *bacha posh* serves the family intention. However, the intention varies as seen in the case of upper or middle-class families where girls are cross-dressed as boys to keep intact the family honour and prestige. Although the girls do not choose their enforced boyhood willingly but in many cases “they enjoy their borrowed status” (67). The *bacha posh* belonging to upper or middle-class families enjoy the privileges of going to school and playing outdoor games with boys, which otherwise, they have been deprived of because of their gender. But those belonging to underprivileged families need to engage in forced child labour for economic sustenance of the family. Nordberg observes:

Among street children in the merchant business, selling chewing gum, polishing shoes, or offering to wash car windows on the streets, some are actual boys, and others are girls in disguise. They are all part of Kabul’s underbelly and, to those who pass them by, mostly just invisible. (67)

Nordberg further observes that irrespective of the families being rich, poor, educated, uneducated, Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazara or Turkoman, what is indistinguishable amongst them is their need for a son. The made-up son supports the family as a breadwinner, plays the role of a *mahram* by accompanying the female members of the family to public spaces where women’s mobility is restricted, the one who can have access to education and finally facilitates the family to be complete as the lack of son makes the family incomplete. It is the clothing and the haircut that differentiates a boy from a girl and permits the *bacha posh* to have access to all the privileges and spaces that are otherwise restricted only to the male members in a hegemonic masculine Afghan society. In this context clothing and haircut act as a means of camouflage to conceal the female body while evoking the masculine persona.

Though a *bacha posh* feels empowered as a result of her entrée into the masculine domain, this phase is transitory. The dilemma of these girls when they

have to revert to their feminine selves is analysed by Corboz, Gibbs and Jewkes in their essay “Bacha posh in Afghanistan: factors associated with raising a girl as a boy” (2019):

When girls raised as boys reach puberty, they are usually ‘converted’ back into girls. This often poses a dilemma for those girls who had more freedom and mobility during childhood, only to have this freedom restricted when being required to re-adopt a feminine identity and sometimes being prepared for marriage a short time after becoming a girl again. Conversion back to being a girl may be particularly difficult for those *bacha posh* who identify as male and want to continue living as a boy. (3)

The reversion to womanhood involves a constant struggle as years of performance makes it difficult to reappropriate the body into the feminine persona. After switching to the feminine persona, she has to unlearn the things that she has mastered as a boy and adopt the feminine body language. The overt appearance becomes easy to convert but the psychological impact left by years of performance is difficult to wipe out. Shukria, a former *bacha posh* narrates her experience in Nordberg’s *The Underground Girls of Kabul*: “With time, nurture can become nature...Becoming a man is simple. The outside is easy to change. Going back is hard. There is a feeling inside that will never change” (178). It is then that a *bacha posh* suffers from gender dysphoria. Gender dysphoria results from the experience of gender incongruence that causes uneasiness in the *bacha posh* after she switches to her biological identity. Mark A. Yarhouse in his book *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture* (2015) defines gender dysphoria as thus:

Gender dysphoria refers to the experience of having a psychological and emotional identity as either male or female, and that your psychological and emotional identity does not correspond to your biological sex—this perceived incongruity can be the source of deep and ongoing discomfort. Specifically, gender dysphoria is on the one hand the experience of being born male (biological sex) but feeling a psychological and emotional identity as female. Similarly, gender dysphoria is the experience of being born female (biological sex) but feeling a psychological or emotional identity as male. (19)

However, Mark A. Yarhouse’s concept of gender dysphoria is different from the kind of dysphoria experienced by a *bacha posh*. Yarhouse examines gender dysphoria as a transgendered concept. But the gender dysphoria that a *bacha posh* suffers from is not a genetic disorder as *bacha posh* is an imposed identity upon the girl to perform the role of maleness: “Her identity develops from a mere biological female to becoming a culturally defined boy through social interaction, within the family and outside” (Sawitri 16). The *bacha posh* is reared in an altogether different cultural setting where rather than the fostering of feminine qualities such as compliance and submissiveness, excessively aggressive masculine attitudes are encouraged. The momentary liberty they experience as a result of the isolation from their birth gender creates gender identity conflict in them.

*Bacha posh* is not a novel tradition but can be traced back to twentieth-century Afghanistan. King Habibullah Khan who reigned Afghanistan from 1901 to 1919 devised the concept of appointing women sentinels, dressed in men's apparel to guard the king's harem. He designated his youngest daughter to stand as the guard of the harem garbed in man's uniform. Assigning male sentinels to watchdog the harem could be hazardous to women's chastity and the royal bloodline. Before appointing women guards, eunuchs stood as sentries to guard the king's mistresses. But, by his novel idea, women replaced the eunuchs to stand as sentries of the harem, thereby marking the initiation of the presence of cross-dressed women in the history of the royal stratum of Afghan society. However, the presence of such cross-dressed women is not confined to Afghanistan alone. Such women could be traced in different eras of the Western and Eastern history who mostly performed the role of warriors. Nordberg cites a number of such woman warriors who dressed as men:

In the first century, Triaria of Rome joined her emperor husband in war, wearing men's armor. Zenobia was a third-century queen in Syria who grew up as a boy and went on to fight the Roman empire on horseback. Around the same time in China, Hua Mulan took her father's place in battle, wearing his clothes. Joan of Arc was famously said to have seen an archangel in 1424, causing her to adopt the look of a male soldier and help fight France's war against England. (198)

Nordberg further states that the Catholic Church not only approves woman cross-dressed as a man but honours them for their bravery and demonstration of masculine traits. Valerie Hotchkiss observes that in medieval Europe, the women who cross-dressed as men preferred to remain celibate throughout their lives. One also finds references in the twelfth-century religious texts such as - *Scivias* by Hildegard von Bingen and *Summa Theologica* by Thomas Aquinas- about engaging such women during wars and other emergency situations. Dutch historians Lotte C. van de Pol and Rudolf M. Dekker in their research on the experiences of these women discovered that between the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries in Europe, there lived more than a hundred women who either took the profession of sailors or soldiers disguised in men's clothing. Their gender identities were revealed only after their death when their bodies were carried off the battleground. These women adopted male identity for reasons similar to that of *bacha posh* in Afghanistan. Some undertook male identity to support themselves and their families, some masqueraded as men to travel or evade forced marriages, while others went for higher education as it was forbidden for women. Unfortunately, they had to face trial when their disguise was unmasked, though the punishment became lenient for those women who took part in wars for the cause of their lands. However, by the nineteenth century, the phenomenon of women cross-dressing as men gradually declined. Perhaps, it might be due to the rise of an organized society based on a civil registration system where certain measures like border controls and medical inspections were made obligatory for soldiers as a result of which it became difficult for women to disguise as men. Similar to the *bacha posh* practise in Afghanistan, there exists

in Northern Albania and Montenegro an age-old practice known as 'sworn-virgins' as a consequence of a highly patriarchal and patrilineal tribal society "where children are thought to stem directly from the blood of the father, and the woman is considered merely a carrier" (199). Thus, the *bacha posh* is not an exclusively Afghan practice but exists in other parts of the world throughout the history of women.

This age-old cultural practice is the core issue upon which Nadia Hashmi has set her novels. In *One Half from the East*, Obayda becomes a victim of this cultural practice at the age of ten when her father has been maimed for life by the bomb blast and the family has to shift from Kabul to settle in the village. Her aunt concocts the idea of transforming Obayda into a boy assuring her mother that such a practice would herald good luck to the family.

Make Obayda into a boy. With her as a son, she will bring good luck to your home. You'll see your husband cheer up. Then you plan for another baby in the family. Having a *bacha posh* at home brings boy energy into your household. The next baby that comes will be a boy. And once you have a real son, watch what happens. Your husband will come back to life. I've seen this work in the families around us. It's not magic—it's just how it is. And that's when Obayda can go back to being a girl. (14)

The new identity imposed upon Obayda makes her world topsy-turvy. She always liked being a girl, doing "girl things" (2016:14) and had a great fascination for dancing. The *bacha posh* identity becomes problematic for Obayda as she has to unlearn the things that she has learned as a girl for ten years and adopt the new language and behaviour of boys. She is debarred from household chores and is expected to play outdoor games with boys and go out to the market. A sense of insecurity and the fear of being exposed looms large in her mind. Her sense of insecurity becomes more acute when she goes to school and finds herself amid boys in the school playground: "I watch the boys drift one way and the girls another. I am now in the weird place between both worlds" (2016: 24). Her *bacha posh* identity leads her to an awkward situation where she is neither able to assimilate with boys nor with girls. Through Obayda's complex state of mind, Hashmi projects that the dubious identity of a *bacha posh* results from the fact that she has to enact masculinity with a female body. Obayda struggles hard to perform the role of Obayd but "still haven't fully got used to it" (2016: 25). She finds that the masculine gender behaviour is indeed different from that of the female and strives to tackle the sex-gender dichotomy. However, Obayda's struggle to appropriate herself to the masculine gender role becomes less complicated when she meets another *bacha posh* in her school. Rahim/Rahima tells Obayda that to perform the role of *bacha posh* efficiently, she must stop thinking herself as a female garbed in male clothing, but consider herself a boy: "You're a boy, not a *bacha posh*, Obayd. If you get that, there is nothing else" (2016: 36). Rahima has competently adopted the masculine body language and loves her *bacha posh* identity as it provides her with the freedom that she has been deprived of as a female. Though 'Rahim' is an imposed identity, yet she has

been able to naturalise her body to the masculine gender role because she has learned that “Being a boy is not all in your pants. It’s in your head” (36). The body must adjust to the mind.

Renouncing the feminine gender indeed provides Rahima and Obayda with the benefits of male privilege but they know very well that such freedom is illusory. They can enact masculinity but can never be a man since the *bacha posh* is socially perceived as a subordinated masculinity. The subordinated masculinity can in no way be a liberating force, rather it complicates the subject position of the body. They are both “one half from the east and one half from the west” (2016: 36) as Obayda’s mother describes them. They want to get rid of their dubious identity as it prevents them from being neither fully male nor fully female. The interplay between the body and the social process results in complex gender role leaving them in an in-between position. Rahima confesses: “That’s the problem with being half things...it’s hard if you think you’re missing something. I don’t want to be a half thing. I just want to be one whole normal me.” (2016: 55). Obayda agrees with her. With time Obayda becomes complacent in her role as a *bacha posh* and is unwilling to retrogress to her birth sex. She desires to take up the masculine identity in perpetuity, thereby dispelling the ‘half thing’ to become ‘one whole normal’ being. But she is aware that like the *bacha posh* identity thrust upon her, the parents would again transform her into a girl. Her sense of insecurity rises when she comes to know about her mother’s pregnancy. If it’s a girl, she would also be a victim of the tradition of *bacha posh*, but if it’s a boy her role as *bacha posh* would come to an end: “If it is a boy, I’m finished. My parents will have the son they need and my work as a *bacha posh* will be complete” (2016: 60). To get rid of her contradictory position, and live as unitary subject Obayda becomes possessed by the rainbow myth and heads towards the mountain range in search of the rainbow with the belief that walking under the rainbow would metamorphose her into a boy forever. Nordberg discusses in her book how the rainbow myth of gender-changing is widespread in Afghanistan:

The rainbow, a favourite element in every mythology from the Norse to the Navajo people, often symbolizes wish fulfilment. In Afghanistan, finding a rainbow promises a very special reward: It holds magical powers to turn an unborn child into a boy when a pregnant woman walks under it. Afghan girls are also told that they can become boys by walking under a rainbow, and many little girls have tried. (Nordberg 229)

Obayda’s disappearance in the quest for the rainbow causes much tension in the family and to her utter dismay, she finally learns from her mother that the rainbow is only a legend told to children. Dejected, she questions her mother: “Why would you want me to be a boy only for now? If being a boy now is good, isn’t being a boy forever even better?” (Hashmi 2016: 91). Obayda was content with her identity as a girl before the *bacha posh* identity had been imposed upon her. With the imposition of *bacha posh* identity, she begins to grow up with altogether different psychosocial expectation which in turn creates confusion

about her own identity. This acute sense of discomfort results from the non-conformity between her female body and the masculine gender role that she has to enact which develops a kind of gender dysphoria in her. The experience of gender dysphoria resulting from the imposed identity triggers unease by isolating her not only from the family but also from the larger mainstream society. Thus, Hashmi demonstrates the nuances and complexities associated with the practice of *bacha posh* which proves problematic for girls to assimilate back into their culture as they become baffled about their identity.

Hashmi's critical stance on the practice of *bacha posh* is also reflected in her novel *The Pearl that Broke its Shell*. When the Taliban ruled over the streets of Afghanistan asserting domination through force and noxious practices, it became difficult for Rahima and her sisters to attend school and leave the house as they had no brother but an inept father who was a narcotist. Under such circumstances, Madar-jan (a term of endearment for mother) transforms Rahima into a *bacha posh* as she needs help with the errands and it has seemed unfeasible for her to depend on Padar-jan for anything. "Bachem, from now on we're going to call you Rahim instead of Rahima" Madar-jan tells her (2014: 35). Once the *bacha posh* identity has been thrust upon her, Rahima has to adjust her body to accommodate herself into the new gender role. To maintain the charade, she has to learn the new language and behaviour of boys like Obayda. Like most of the *bacha posh*, it becomes problematic for Rahima to enter into the new territory: "My instincts were to jerk back, to run away and never to look them (the boys) in the eye again" (2014: 67). Rahima has to readjust her body to a completely different psychosocial expectation and is indeed perplexed to observe the transformation in her mother's behaviour towards her. Her mother constantly orients her to acclimatize her body to the masculine gender behaviour and she is constantly apprehensive about the masquerade being exposed:

"Listen, Rahim-jan. You should be out with the boys, playing. That's what boys do— do you understand what I'm saying?" ...

... "Yes Madar-jan, but sometimes I just don't want to. They... they push each other a lot."

"Then push back."

I was surprised by her advice but the look on her face told me she was serious. Here sat my mother telling me the exact opposite of what she'd always said. I would have to toughen up." (68)

Rahima's cross-gender identification as a result of the imposed identity altered her mother's response to facilitate her to adopt the cultural expectations of maleness. As already referred, Rahima is not the only member in the family to have adopted the practice of cross-dressing. Rahima hears from her aunt Khala Shaima the account of her great-great-grandmother who was a son to her father and worked in the farm like a boy and who also worked as a harem-guard in King Habibullah's palace, dressed in man's uniform. Resisting the tradition of reverting to the birth sex once a *bacha posh* attains the age of puberty, Rahima nevertheless continues to cross-dress as a boy till Padar-jan arranges her

marriage with Abdul Khaliq, a dominant warlord. Padar-jan decides to marry off Rahima and her two sisters with Abdul Khaliq and his cousins in exchange for a large bride price and a supply of opium. Madar-jan resists but to no avail. Padar-jan is obstinate in his decision. Nordberg discusses how at this moment daughters are discernibly the cards played by Afghan fathers:

Men make alliances, and not necessarily in the best interest of their daughters. These alliances are related to the social prestige and honour of the family. But it may also be opportunism. They want to marry up to create more security— financial or physical— for the family in a time of need. (Nordberg 152)

Through the predicament of Rahima, Hashmi projects that in a hegemonic masculine society woman are repressed at every stage. *Bacha posh* and marriage act as restrictive mechanisms that threaten the subjectivity of women. Firstly, she is transformed into a boy by the imposition of the *bacha posh* practise to absolve the family from stigma and undertake the family responsibility, next, she is regressed to a girl by the imposition of marriage for the financial security of her family. Deniz Kandiyoti describes the marriages of young girls to older men as “distress sales to food or cash” (Kandiyoti 180). Rahima and her sisters become victims of such forced marriages but in case of Rahima things become more problematic because of the frequent reversal of roles imposed upon her.

At the age of thirteen, Rahima becomes the fourth wife of the warlord Abdul Khaliq. Years of performing the masculine role have left certain permanent marks in her which prevents her from accommodating wholly into her new role as Abdul Khaliq’s wife. Her marital life becomes highly dissatisfying. She loathes her husband as he dehumanizes her by inflicting violence upon her to assert his dominance:

The thought of him made me queasy. I hated the feeling of it. I hated his breath, his whiskers, his callused feet. But there would be no escape. He called for me when he pleased and made me do what he wanted. (Hashmi, 2014, p.169)

Abdul Khaliq’s oppressive nature restricts Rahima’s autonomy and space in her new environment. Ever since Rahima was converted into a *bacha posh* she was debarred from household chores, and now reframing her life to feminine obligations has been difficult for her. Her mother-in-law asks Abdul Khaliq’s first wife, Badriya to keep Rahima under constant surveillance so that she gets acquainted with her feminine duties and can perform appropriately the role of a wife:

“Make sure she does a good job, Badriya. This girl has a lot to learn. She was a *bacha posh*, don’t forget. Can you believe that? A *bacha posh* at this age! No wonder she has no clue how to carry herself as a woman. Look at the way she walks, her hair, her fingernails! Her mother should be ashamed of herself.” (176)

Her mother-in-law not only condemns her for lacking feminine traits and

but also accuses her mother of allowing her to continue with her *bacha posh* identity even after puberty. Rahima's only salvation in her miserable life is her son, Jahangir. Being able to bear a son Rahima's position in the family becomes somewhat better as Jahangir becomes one of Abdul Khaliq's favourites. But any reprieve for Rahima is momentary. When the new government comes to power and demands women to be members of the parliament, Abdul Khaliq promotes Badriya as one of the members to exert his influence over government affairs. As Rahima knows to read and write, she offers to help Badriya in Kabul. Though she seems uncertain to leave Jahangir behind but grabs the opportunity when Abdul Khaliq permits her to assist Badriya in Kabul. While she is in Kabul, Jahangir becomes ill and by the time she returns home, to her utter dismay he passes away. Rahima could not believe her destiny. Jahangir was her only solace in her wretched life. The demise of her son leaves her dejected and devastated. Rahima bemoans her lot:

I was a little girl and then I wasn't.  
 I was a *bacha posh* and then I wasn't.  
 I was a daughter and then I wasn't.  
 I was a mother and then I wasn't.  
 Just as soon as I could adjust, things changed. I changed. This last change  
 was the worst. (2014: 384)

Life provides Rahima with such diverse ephemeral roles that each time she attempts to accommodate herself to a particular role it alters and then she is assigned to another new role. The death of her son steals the very breath of her existence. When Rahima is still not able to overcome the grief at the loss of her son, Abdul Khaliq accuses her of their son's death: "A *bacha posh*. I should have known better. You still don't know what it is to be a woman" (2014: 408). At every blow, he curses her for being an irresponsible mother. He cuts off her hair and assaults her brutally, causing Rahima to miscarry her unborn child: "Fresh tears for a new loss. I may have killed one of Abdul Khaliq's children. But he has just killed another" (2014: 409). Nevertheless, Rahima does not abandon hope as her aunt Khala Shaima's words ring in her ears. She often used to say her that everyone needs an 'escape.' Inspired by Khala Shaima's words Rahima make plans to escape from her state of wretchedness. When she goes to Kabul with Badriya to assist her, she narrates her whole story to Hamida and Sufia, the women parliamentarians with whom she befriends and makes plans to escape by feigning sickness. Finally, she cuts off her hair, cross-dresses herself in men's attire to transform from Rahima to Rahim and escapes from her restrictive life.

Hashmi's novels project the complexities faced by the feminine body through participating in the social practice of *bacha posh*. The practice of *bacha posh* is the outcome of a dysfunctional society and a reflection of its vulnerability. Though by feigning masculinity girls can have access to freedom yet such a notion of agency proves to be evanescent. Hashmi demonstrates how her characters suffer from gender dysphoria because of the imposition of *bacha posh* identity upon them. Both Obayda and Rahima want to get rid of the subordinated

masculinity of *bacha posh* at it complicates their subject position and leads to complex gender relations. Their quest to initiate themselves into masculine gender roles and their despise against their birth gender grows from the subordinate position of women in the hegemonic masculine Afghan society. But they also come to terms with the fact that by enacting masculinity through the practice of *bacha posh*, they can never truly liberate themselves from subjugation, rather it results in further subordination of their bodies.

### **Notes :**

- <sup>1</sup> The concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' which has influenced gender studies across diverse academic fields has been discussed by Connell and Messerschmidt in their essay "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept"

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## **THE ORDER OF EXTRA-TERRESTRIALS— RESEARCHING THE DYNAMICS OF ALIEN FORMS IN SCIENCE FICTION**

**Ruchita Machal**

### **Abstract**

The concept of extra-terrestrial life has been a subject of much contemplation and speculation. Science Fiction has given its readers a glimpse into what this alien life can be in the sense that it has given a palpable materiality to the physiognomy of alien race. Some of the new developments in the construction of aliens have moved away from the bug-eyed monstrous figure to an idiosyncratic sentient being different from the human race. Many Science Fiction stories have given a dialogic complexity to the interspecies contact and its repercussions for human beings. Alien life in these stories has been analysed through human mannerisms. They pique the curiosity by trying to understand the alien and further encourage a mean to propagate the human agenda of benefitting from the alien technology.

The posthuman fundamentals challenge the continuity of humanist tendencies which establish human life at the apex of understanding what is essentially not human. Recent works in SF have given prominence to reconstruction/deconstruction of alien life thereby changing the modalities of conception of these sentient beings. Moreover, the real challenge lies in the anatomy of these alien bodies which address the aporia of human imagination.

The objective of this research paper is to examine some of these anthropomorphic characteristics that homo sapiens employ in deciphering the alien race as means of understanding their behaviour and their degree of intelligence. Through the paper I am investigating a quantifiable expression for these anatomically different alien lives and their cataclysmic contact with the human race. In this diachronic study, I have traced the changing schema around the alien bodies and its possible absence in some of the recent SF.

**Keywords :** science fiction, extra-terrestrials, posthumanism, anthropomorphism.

The concept of extra-terrestrial life has been a subject of much contemplation and speculation. The inexhaustible montage of space adventures in SF reveals the magnitude of the relationship humans share with the unexplored. Science Fiction has given its readers a glimpse into what this alien life can be in the sense that it has given a palpable materiality to the physiognomy

of alien race. Furthermore, the representation of alien race has always held a tacit meaning for human beings. SF induces the critical faculties to rethink the nature of life forms other than our own. However, the bigger challenge has not been the abstract hypotheses of alien life, but the implications of this nonhuman entity on our world. Needless to say, that some of the early science fiction had pivoted towards the horrifying invasion of our world by the aliens in an attempt to enslave the human race, or worse, annihilate earth and our existence with it. This fascination with the introduction of other exobiological life forms in science-fictional universe and the plausible interpretation of this novum phenomena is the central issue of this paper.

The science-fictional alien has always implied towards its inherent otherness – it is what humans are not. The desire to reach the stars and establish contact with other life forms has been the product of evolving human consciousness and the nature of our being. Science fiction became the medium of sustenance to this phenomenon which gave shape to our desires and fantasies in a remote setting without giving away much of the inhibitions. In the essay “Some Things We Know About Aliens”, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. writes that the aliens in SF are variants of mythological beasts and monsters from the adventure genre of pulps. They occupy the same literary space as angels and demons did in mythical models. He further extrapolates that aliens are evolutionary beings just like humans, but more importantly the existence of humans is related to the former since “aliens are our shadows, and we are theirs” (1). The aliens acquire their meaning through a system of lack, they represent the human desire for the unknown and unexplored so as to give a sense of wholeness to our existence. The dialectic of alien figure works through a binary - the monstrous alien is destroyed in the plot or the peaceful alien resorts to operate as modus vivendi with their human counterparts. The cosmic isolation of human civilization is questioned in SF through the imagist reproduction of other evolutionary forms in disparate galaxies. They subvert our laws of the world and surprise us by their invasion into the human territory. Since homo sapiens revel in their sole existence, the image of an alien figure is necessary to challenge this existential predicament in the universe. They exist not for themselves, but for human subjects as they are symbolic entities in the conceptual framework of human imagination.

SF stories about alien invasion could perhaps hint at the progressive growth of scientific technology masking the inherent fear of the unknown and unchartered horizons. It would not be wrong to assume that H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (1897) was the first to popularise the theme of alien invasion in the SF literary canon. The trend of attributing monstrous characteristics to personify the nonhuman alien race has pervaded the popular imagination. Even though Wells's vision may not have been prophetic but it symbolizes the end of British Empire, and the impending dread of being subjected to colonisation by a far more superior race. It features mankind facing an unmediated attack from the aforementioned superior Martian race who is emboldened by the possession of their advanced weaponry like the heat ray and the poison gas. This catastrophe

unleashed on the human civilisation bears the undertone of an evolutionary struggle in the Darwinian sense of ‘survival of the fittest’ in dangerous circumstances. The imminent war on Europe and the instruments of war were few of the predictions in *War of the Worlds* which proved to be far too realistic than fiction in the coming years. The novel ends on a rather interesting note that no matter how advanced the Martians were, they were eventually destroyed by the opulent micro-organisms in the Earth’s ecosystem. The novel seems to assert that the natural selection expunges the unfit, and since sapiens have adapted and evolved in accordance with Earth’s ecosystem, they are at an obvious advantage than their nemesis. Another note could be made on the anatomy of the alien body – the unnamed protagonist in the novel points out in *Book Two* that these Martians were essentially just an enlarged head with no olfactory system but dark and protruding eyes, and tentacles which could be an appendage for limbs. Alien life in this novel appears to be an assortment of various animalistic characteristics; the large head could symbolise towards its advanced mental capacity than humans. But what particularly stands out is the lack of olfactory system which may indicate at the absence of a determinant in its psychological perception<sup>1</sup>. To put it simply, the sense of smell functions as one of the qualitative factors in representation/misrepresentation. This could imply that the Martians may visually perceive human as representational objects but not as experiential entities and hence lack the subjectivity in their judgment towards human race.

John Campbell’s “Who Goes There?” (1938) is a fan favourite which has been imprinted in the popular memory by John Carpenter’s directorial rendition in *The Thing*. The novella was firstly published in *Astounding Science Fiction* and has garnered much respect among the fans because of its horrific representation of the alien in the eeriness of an isolated backdrop. The alien in the novella is discovered by a group of scientists on an expedition to Antarctica and subsequently the alien is named as the Thing. The alien spaceship and its original occupant are found frozen in ice, the scientists decide to bring the alien back to the base camp and thaw it in order to study its curious anatomy. Once defrosted the alien escapes and the nature of the story changes from a stereotypical science fiction to one that belongs to horror. It is soon discovered that the alien can mutate itself into any organic form as some of the expedition dogs and few of the scientists are later revealed to be its myriad manifestations. In this generic amalgamation, Campbell’s story acquires a stylistic rendition similar to that of horror and of detective fiction since the scientists are acutely paranoid by the Thing’s unexplainable existence ensuing the search for its imitations. Certainly, the alien is not just the figure from outer space but also an imposter amongst the human beings. The Thing in “Who Goes There?” is a peculiar alien since it lacks a distinct body, the only feature of its original form is the head. The alien discovered by the scientists has a tentacled head and three bulbous eyes red in colour which seems to echo the characteristics of the fabled Medusa’s head. The lower half of the alien’s body resembles that of a husky dog which it may have partially ingested but was frozen in the process of metamorphosis. Its alien biology is understood to be protoplasmic since each cell component of the alien’s

anatomy has a mind of its own. The alien is also intelligent and skilled since it is able to create atomic energy in the sub-zero temperature at Antarctica. Perhaps, psychic abilities could be attributed to it since the explorers begin to have nightmares whenever they are in close proximity with the alien. Such distinct characteristics make the Thing a creature straight out of nightmares, but also an interesting figure.

Alien bodies and human interactions with the alien are essentially self-reflexive. The alien is an embodiment of what the human imagination conceptualises as the other. But in Campbell's story, the alien may be a violent monster but it is not one who is xenopsychozoic<sup>2</sup>. Most the alien figures in SF are revealed to possess intelligence but the historical traces of their intelligence and their idea of being is different from that of humans. But in Campbell's story, the alien does not retain its original form but mutates itself as a clone of the human species or any other living being it encounters. In this sense the alien is not a creature from outer space, the alien is us. This literal metamorphosis of the alien works as a metaphorical mirror for the human subject. In Lacanian terminology, the concept of "I" or the "ego" is developed in the mirror stage which later adds to the symbolic order of identity formation. The process of identification with the mirror image adds to the experience of human existence in the ontological sense. The complex association in Lacanian discourse is foundational to the psychical concepts of "self" and "other". This relational modality between the self and the other foregrounds the relationship between human and the alien. The Thing from "Who Goes There?" is the dissociative split between the narcissistic human and the hostility of a monstrous figure. Apart from the relational metonymy not much about the alien is revealed in the story. By the end, the Thing evolves from a neuter pronoun "it" to a personal pronoun "he" connoting the humanization of the alien.

The creative faculties in the writers of speculative fiction have pushed the limits of imagination to spawn a meta-human projection in the conceptualisation of alien species. The famous American anthropologist Loren Eiseley rightly complains that the aliens in SF are not necessarily alienated from human beings; "alien" exemplifies human traits, their unfamiliarity can only be understood through the familiar – they signify what human consider alien which is not far removed from human imagination<sup>3</sup>. The introduction of alien in SF fulfils the role of an actant to the story wherein the human could discover more about the self by exploring the horizon of what we conceptualise as the "other". Since it is impossible for man to understand what is absolutely alien, the human imagination inadvertently creates the alien figure who receives its meaning through humanist terms. Similarly, Elana Gomel in her seminal work *Science Fiction, Alien Encounters, and the Ethics of Posthumanism* (2014) posits an argument that the alien pushes the boundaries of humanism and anthropocentrism. She proclaims that "a certain degree of anthropomorphism in imagining alien intelligence is inevitable. We are cognitively hard-wired to

ascribe agency to other beings and since the only intelligence we know is our own, fictional aliens are likely to mirror their creators to some degree" (11).

Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* (1985) is a staple for alien encounter in SF since it strictly adheres to the formula of alien invasion and humans battling the vicious aliens to emerge as valiant warriors and protectors of mankind. The alien race in the novel "Formics" are also called "buggers" because of their insect-like characteristics controlled by the Queen of their hive who commands the alien species. The basic premise of the novel mirrors the law of the jungle, similar to that of *War of the Worlds* –destroy the alien before it destroys us. The possibilities of establishing a relationship with the alien are never explored and the directive for communicating with the alien is inevitably spoken through war. The young protagonist of the novel Ender Wiggin is the prodigal son and a product of utilitarian principles set in futuristic Earth. He is the ultimate war machine cultivated by the war tycoons to end the alien race. Surprisingly, the protagonist is unaware of the attacks he commands as a leader of his platoon since he has been made to believe that he is training via a game simulation. In the end he grieves for the genocide he committed when he parleys with the truth of his (mis)adventures and decides to make amends by helping to find a new home planet for the survivors of the war. The dehumanisation of the alien in this novel perhaps finds a resolve at the end when the protagonist uncovers the reality by acquiring a perspective on the existential reality of the other, in this case tapping into the consciousness similar to the one deployed by Queen of the hive. He is able to understand that the buggers were an intelligent life too, and they had no intention of destroying humankind once they understood that the earthlings were not a threat. But on Earth, it is the war-hungry commanders who used Ender to inflict genocide on the alien race. Orson Scott Card subtly circumvents his predecessors' works about alien invasion by offering a means of communication to the aliens to plead their case with the homo sapiens. This idea establishes a familiarity with the alien and makes it difficult to portray them as the evil extra-terrestrials as done by most of the SF during the age. Since the other (alien) has often been the enemy, Orson Scott Card implies that an introspection in the mind of the subaltern née alien could effectively alter the perspective of the self. The ethical issues raised in the work resonate strongly towards the end when the marginalised other has been given the agency of power which shifts the paradigm of human self-centredness.

SF stories have had a heuristic approach while giving a form to the alien; since there is an obvious dearth of real-life aliens to borrow from, SF has seen alien life as successive links in the evolutionary process. Carl Sagan's political critique in *Contact* (1985) may be an unfitting example to understand alien anatomy, but it's certainly a worthy contender foremost in theorizing the existence of an advanced civilisation billions and billions of galaxies away from us. Apart from the popular series *Cosmos*, Sagan was also directly involved with SETI (Search for Extra Terrestrial Intelligence) and was convinced that we are not alone in this universe. The idea that an alien species much advanced than us

should contact Earth not for invasion but possibly to share their technology could only be conceived by a sceptic astrophysicist like Sagan. The protagonist, Ellie Arroway in the novel becomes Sagan's mouthpiece when she argues that it would be preposterous of human beings to think that we are the only life form in a universe filled with countless galaxies and celestial objects. Also, the alien in the novel never reveals its true form or home planet but appears as a human so as to not perturb the human explorer. Many critics have pointed at theological underpinnings in *Contact*'s alien, however, I wish to point at one specific detail which suggests the changing topology of the non-human life. The alien materializes itself in a human form, and not just any human, but someone from our memory who may have had a profound impact on our life. This makes the alien cognitively advanced than our race as they are able to understand our complex unconscious and the repressed to simulate surroundings based on the receptors' degree of consciousness. As the novel indicates, the sole motive of their contact is to educate the earthlings of pre-existing wormholes in our universe which are portals to other life sustaining planets in the universe. The nature of alien intelligence in *Contact* bears heavy undertones of the God phenomenon offering redemption to humans but through mathematical applications. This kind of benevolent and introspective alien is a stark contrast from the Wellsian model of a violent extra-terrestrial race. Moreover, this friendly neighbourhood alien is also a manifestation of the human psychosis preaching humanist ethics.

The physical matter of alien anatomy is reciprocated in a short story by Marion Zimmer Bradley in "The Wind People" published by the magazine *Worlds of If* in 1959. In this experimental story, the woman protagonist decides to cohabit the alien planet with her unborn son as she cannot withstand the propulsion of the hyper jump to planet Earth. The story refrains from giving a corporeal body to the alien race. Rather, the alien could be perceived through the rustling of the wind. The alien of the story belongs to the symbolic realm as it comes to connote the latent sexual desires in the mother for her adolescent son. The alien also befits the modalities of denying knowledge to the human subjects; as the mother is reluctant in believing in alien life so she cannot "see" the alien figure. The metaphorical alien in the story is a transgression into the fear of unknown desires and tabooed territories. The mother's desire for the unknown and her constant repression of these desires are expressed through the alien who remains unseen in the story. Moreover, the oedipal resonances of the son replacing the partner underpin the alien characteristics in the story.

Speculative fiction has been a product of the reaches of human imagination, and alien life has been the mirror-image of what the deontological humans are not. But what is constituent in these representations is how the alien figure operates in the human ecosystem. This heuristic approach only hints at alternative discussions but does not challenge the social normativity which is subtly applied to the alien species. It is rather an extension of domination and normativity for which the human protagonist is the primary signifier. Sonya Dorman's short story "When I was Miss Dow" is a replication of these normative

tendencies that circumscribe alien existence. The story navigates through familiar by-lanes of scientific exploration narrated by the alien protagonist. The alien planet is colonised by human beings and their offices are infiltrated by alien beings who wish to benefit from the technology that their visitors seem to possess. The alien civilisation propounds on singularities: one cerebral brain, one sex, amorphous protean forms which could take the shape of any being. Dorman purports a similar argument even as she subverts the nature of self and the other in the plot. The self in the story (the alien) acquires meaning and identity once it enters the human domain of semiology. The alien protagonist subsumes to the dichotomies of self/ other as it fulfils the role of a female secretary to a male scientist/ lover. In a series of stereotypical plotlines, the alien forgoes its alienness and appropriates to the human world without challenging the social normativity of its inherent nature vis-à-vis its acquired reality. The agency of power in the story lies in the ideological dynamic of the human system reaffirming the dominance of humans as the superior race.

Carl D. Malmgren writes in the essay “Self and the Other in SF: Alien Encounter” that “these alien actants explore the limitations of being human and suggest the possibility of transcending those limits. They examine what we are not, in so doing intimating what we could become” (17). Similarly, Donna Haraway’s ‘cyborg’ or cybernetic organism marks the confrontation between human and animal, human and machine, and human and non-human. In her seminal essay “A Manifesto for the Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Social Feminism in the 1980s” she explicates that the “[cyborg] is a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (149). Haraway argues in her essay that human subject takes centre stage in scientific treatises and the culmination of a cyborg pushes the limitations of technological inference in a capitalist society. Haraway’s cyborg challenges the appropriated dichotomies of human/ animal or human/ non-human, her creature is a hybrid machinic organism who transcends these dichotomies and operates independently in our social systems. She writes, “a cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labour, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity. In a sense, the cyborg has no origin story in the Western sense” (150). The cyborg is a product of Post-War militarised and political institutions reflecting the hierarchical domination of the scientific discourse. It is a splice of human consciousness with human interests at the core as it attempts to redefine the concepts of bodies and identities. Haraway’s work is a resistance on seeing the monsters as teleological aberrant but rather an augmentation of a new phenomenon in our lived social reality and human subjectivity in reading displaced identities. In her third instalment of the Posthumanities series *When Species Meet* (2008), Haraway questions the limits of anthropocentric entitlements in understanding species other than the human beings. She begins her work by offering the anecdote of Derrida’s cat from the lecture “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)”, the cat Derrida mentions is more akin to Carroll’s Cheshire Cat<sup>4</sup> rather than be an allegorical example of profundity. The

question Haraway asks through this Derridean analogy is not what the cat represents, but what it means for the cat to respond. In essence, the cat is independent in its ontological sense, but the way its behaviour is interpreted rests on human phenomenology, and it connotes nothing on what the cat "speaks"<sup>5</sup>. Haraway argues that Derrida propounds his hypothesis on a philosophical plane of understanding the "gaze of the other" for a subject who is obviously at a vantage<sup>6</sup>. Under this hypothesis Derrida fails to acknowledge the "behavioural semiotics" of this cat-human interface. She further extrapolates that to untangle the mystery behind this cat would have meant to develop an argument on the non-linguistic communication between species of different kinds. But Derrida turns introspective in his philosophical debate battling the shame of his nakedness in the presence of another species.

The posthumanist impulse to speculate what the other speaks has been the core of research pertaining to alien worlds. Haraway's work is a classic example of animalographies wherein the posthuman subjectivity controls what the animals/ non-human speaks. No matter how different the alien anatomy may be, but most of formulaic SF would create an alien who behaves similar to its human counterpart. The ethical and cultural characteristics of human life naturally find allegorical representation through alien forms. But the question remains, how to challenge the normativity if the only available language system is our own? Anthropomorphic principles have guided the psychological model of the alien life. But lately, recent criticisms on SF writings have slandered this peculiar intention towards the representation of extra-terrestrial life. Robert G. Pielke notes in his essay "Humans and Aliens: A Unique Relationship" that

...the evolutionary history of every species is unique, and it is related to a given planetary environment. This latter fact makes species that evolve within the same environment related to each other in ways extra-planetary species cannot be. A planetary environment, in other words, creates a family setting from which others are necessarily excluded (30).

This implies that any other intelligent life form in the universe cannot evolve in the same manner as the human genome has evolved over the past years. However, alien life can only be represented through human expressions in a rhetoric available for use. The aporia of extra-terrestrial life challenges the limits of imagination, of which human protagonist is the centre. Nevertheless, few SF writings have challenged the anthropocentric normativity in establishing alien existence.

*Solaris* (1961) by Stanislaw Lem offers a subversive situation in which the human explorers encounter a sentient life unresponsive to any of the human experiments, or better yet, responds in a manner which is incomprehensible to the terran scientists. The ocean-planet Solaris is perceived as an intelligent alien life, but due to their enormous difference material communication between the two species never takes place. Lem's fictional alien is beyond human perception and control since its behavioural patterns are incongruous to our capacities. The ocean-planet bears no visceral anatomy which could be compared to any species

on Earth. The visitors which later haunt the human hosts are similar to the symmetrical and asymmetrical mimoids which erupt in the ocean's myriad formations beneath its plasmic surface.

The scientists aboard the space mission resolve to comprehend the "ocean" through symbolic language as they are "visited" by their erotic and guilt fixations. The ocean possesses the psychical ability to read the unconscious human mind and clone these poignant electrical impulses into a corporal human manifestation. The consistency in Lem's narratorial rendition is the behaviour of the sentient alien life which opposes the anthropocentric claims of other extra-terrestrial renditions in other science-fictional adventures. The interspecies barrier in *Solaris* is more pertinent since neither of the two species are able to comprehend the other's activity, inasmuch the imprints that the ocean transforms in a human body do not alleviate the communication between the two. In relation to this interspecies communication Pielke argues that

...we might not ever be able to get to know each other. There is more than a difference of degree involved here... further, this possible ignorance could very well extend to a mutual inability to know what, if anything, would cause or allow harm to occur. If mutual ignorance were to be so extensive that a knowledge of harm were not possible for either human or moral, it would then be precisely the situation beyond morality that Lem describes. (34)

The synthesis of harm and non-harm could only be established if the two species are able to comprehend the existence of their counterpart. But in the case of *Solaris*, it becomes increasingly certain for the humans to understand that the ocean is beyond these human principles and may not understand the complex dichotomy of morally defined right or wrong precedent.

The determinism in anthropocentric laws does not bridge the interspecies gap between the human scientists and the ocean-planet *Solaris*. The expedition turns from a scientific exercise in understanding alien mannerism to an introspective moral coda of human psyche. These augmented visitors are manifestations of repressed but powerful emotions in the human unconscious; they are not necessarily reproduced by the ocean-planet to perturb the human hosts. They could be emanations of the ocean as an attempt to establish contact with human subjects through a semiotics comprehensible to human system. Furthermore, these ambiguous "assimilations"<sup>7</sup> seem like an embodiment of Freudian Id to the self-centred human conscious. The other in this case is not the sentient alien but the projection of the repressed self which becomes precursory in breaking the barrier of the logical and empirical realities of the human value system. By coming into contact with the alien, the protagonist Kelvin is able to conceive a reality which could not be explained through rational tautology. His cognition of alien activity rests entirely on his decision to abandon his home planet and his sense of humanity with it. Kelvin abandons the egoism of humanity and embraces alien-ness which supplants his non-rational relationship with *Solaris*.

The hominid alien in Michael Bishop's novella "Death and Designation Among the Asadi" reimagines the creatures of high sentience and their interaction with human explorers. The novella first appeared in the 1973 edition of the SF magazine *Worlds of If* and was later included as a prequel to the novel *Transfigurations* in 1979. The novel follows the field notes of Egan Chaney, a xenologist who is on an expedition to study the sundry population of Asadi race on the alien planet, BoskVeld. The Asadi bear a mane like a lion and seem to communicate with a change in the colour of their eyes. The protagonist, Chaney presumes that Asadi population have similarities with the primeval tribal groups but changes his opinion since he cannot find any evidence of what constitutes as folk culture in human systems. He enters the Asadi clearing with a shaved head to be akin to a pariah in the alien culture, and later befriends The Bachelor who becomes a proprietor in his adventure. The Asadi population gather during the day for gesticulation which seem mundane to the protagonist and disperse to their individual stations at dawn to continue the cyclical function next day.

"Death and Designation" is an unsettling story since it showcases the alien race indulging in strange practices which easily transcend to profanity. These alien forms practice cannibalism as a right to passage in becoming a leader. Moreover, their actions are not carried out as acts of free will, they are psychologically connected to a bat-like homunculus who is integral in transfiguring the Asadi male into a leader. Bishop's novella is an appropriate extension to Lem's *Solaris* in conceptualising an alien life form which is truly alien. The grotesque behaviour of Asadi questions the empirical tools of anthropology through an eccentric protagonist who interpellated the alien jurisprudence. The protagonist strives to understand the unnatural behaviour of Asadi as their society does not function as a collaborative unit. They are chaotic and possess no "group consciousness" which does not ascribe to the anthropological definition of a society. Bishop's Asadi is a transgression in the classification of the science fictional alien from a symbolic presence analogue to the human perceiver into a grotesque form which presents an anomaly in the evolutionary process. The design of this grotesque alien upholds the laws of the human world as it obstructs further contemplation on its ontological existence. The discerning factor in the social activities of the Asadi is amiss since it requires a preconception of indeterminacy in the limited horizon of human imagination. The Asadi ritual on death is a continuum of the organic transmutations in the evolution of life forms in the universe.

The fictional alien in scientific narratives has been a pertinent aid in the exploration of the anthropological territories of terran species. The deep-seated interspecies differences cause tension in the conceptualised framework of the human cosmos. The alien figure transcends from the clutches of being an allegorical phantom to a stimulating projection of the humanist tendencies imposed on other species. The invention of alien in SF is fundamental in reiterating the fragmentary ideals of the existing order. It is meant to unsettle its readers and inspire awe by evaluating the ethical modalities of human systems.

The prognosis of alien contact in SF conspicuously incorporates varieties of ontological dilemma within the human traditions. Moreover, these alien sentiments mediate an examination in the socio-historical complexities of the human morphology. The artistic consciousness of SF in the formation of a new evolutionary ideal juxtaposes the desire to delimit the territorial dominion of the infinitesimal human species in the vast universe.

### **Notes :**

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- <sup>1</sup> Clare Batty proposes an argument in her article “A Representation Account of Olfactory Experience” that olfactory perception adds to the visual experience of representational objects rather than remain purely sensational.
- <sup>2</sup> Istvan Csicsery-Ronan, Jr. mentions in the article “Some Things We Know About Aliens” that “the paradox of ‘alien’ is that it designates a creature at the line of the near (the house of ‘uncanny’) and the distant (the space of ‘xenopsychozoic’).
- <sup>3</sup> The anthropologist complains in *The Immense Journey*, “In modern literature on space travel I have read about cabbage men and bird men; I have investigated the loves of lizard men and tree men, but in each case I have labored under no illusion. I have been reading about a man, *Homo sapiens*, that common earthling, clapped into an ill-fitting coat of feathers and retaining all his basic human attributes...” .
- <sup>4</sup> Derrida finds the cat in his room symbolically similar to Carroll’s Cheshire Cat in *Alice in Wonderland*.
- <sup>5</sup> Donna Haraway in *When Species Meet* writes, “He [Derrida] identified the key question as being not whether the cat could “speak” but whether it is possible to know what *respond* means and how to distinguish a response from a reaction, for human beings as well as for anyone else”.
- <sup>6</sup> Derrida refers to the phrase as “gaze of an animal” in the lecture. He writes, “I often ask myself, just to see, *who I am* – and who I am (following) at the moment when, caught naked, in silence, by the gaze of an animal, for example the eyes of a cat, I have trouble, yes, a bad time overcoming my embarrassment”.
- <sup>7</sup> A conversation between Kelvin and Snow in *Solaris*. The two characters are giving their hypotheses on the visitors. “Perhaps it used a formula which is not expressed in verbal terms. It may be taken from a recording imprinted on our minds (...) ‘It’ removed the deepest, most isolates imprint, the most ‘assimilated’ structure, without necessarily knowing what it meant to us.”

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# **CRY WITCH: REPRESENTATION OF GERMAN WITCH-LORE AND PERSECUTION OF DISPOSSESSED WOMEN IN OLIVER POTZSCH'S *THE HANGMAN'S DAUGHTER* AND ERIKA MAILMAN'S *THE WITCH'S TRINITY***

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## **Abstract**

Witch trials in Continental Europe had overrun societies at large throughout Western civilizational history. The speculation about the existence of what basically boiled down to harvesting the occult and invoking the paranormal- an idea that resuscitated itself every century since the Classical Antiquities with resurgent waves of public paranoia- ultimately culminated into intermittent incidents of genocide of the paradoxically “accused victims”. While maintaining an inextricable connection with sorcery- associated with men of learned scholarship- witchcraft was viewed as a predominantly women-centric practice of the supernatural, which came to be pejoratively presented in patriarchal, Christian socio-cultural discourse as more malicious and actively detrimental than helpful or wise. The scarlet letter of witchcraft accusations were mostly geared towards a) Wise Women in the margins of society- women who exhibited knowledge and skill in medicine, herbal remedies and midwifery, b) women either stepping outside parameters of “acceptable” (sexual or otherwise) behaviour or going beyond sexual control by men due to age /infertility, and c) women connected with potential rivals in the game of political clout. *The Hangman's Daughter* by Oliver Potzsch and *The Witch's Trinity* by Erika Mailman transact with all three tiers of victimizable candidates, in the national as well as religious background of German anti-witch discourse, which had been predominated by Kramer and Sprnger's *Malleus Maleficarum*, set in the time when fanaticism and Catholic fear-mongering had formed the bedrock of the German witch trials. Alongside inspecting the authenticity of representation of continental German (associated with the Holy Roman Empire) witch-lore and historicity of the trials, the paper shall investigate the inescapable link between Church-backed patriarchy's delusional fear, jealousy and consequent scapegoating through physical/sexual violence towards the economically and socio-sexually marginalized.

**Keywords :** Germany, Witch, Misogyny, Rape, Violence, Scapegoating

"Because in these times this perfidy is more often found in women than in men [...] since they are feebler both in mind and body, it is not surprising that they should come more under the spell of witchcraft."

"She is an imperfect animal, she always deceives."

Heinrich Kramer, and Jacob Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum* (Summers 101-2)

The hunts for the w(itch)-people were set in motion with the initiation of the Inquisition in the late Middle Ages in Europe, which had practically "invented the witch doctrine: the idea of the diabolic witch who had forged a pact with the Devil and sealed it with her flesh, who flew through the night to the witches' sabbath, was the sworn enemy of ordinary society" (Stokes 1), essentially imagining a non-Christian and hence heretical organization which supposedly acted in malevolent opposition to the Church, or metonymically, the still-powerful Holy Roman empire. In order to buttress and solidify fearful adherence to religious orthodoxy (Reineke 4) and later to the state machinery as well, a formidable Satan-inspired and -associated enemy was created when the presiding force had further extended to secular authorities in order to curb the apparent destruction of public order via witchcraft.

To say that Germany had been the epicentre of frenzied genocidal tendencies towards the alleged "witches" is undercutting it. The country was rife with political tension "during mid-fifteenth century, [when] in many parts of the German-speaking Alpine regions, banishment began to give way to execution as the standard punishment for sorcery and witchcraft" (Stokes 15). Thousands were killed in a travesty of public justice, many more tortured before release, or forever stigmatized by their community. The socio-economic and socio-sexual status of the accused who were mainly women (particularly those who were either old enough to have outlived the time frame of their reproductive "duty", or who lacked the presence of male guardianship in the form of a parental, filial, or spousal figure) was prime reason behind victimization and prosecution. The Middle Ages had thereby painted a sordid picture of how patriarchy tried to rid itself of women it considered disposable 'debris' beyond sexual dominion. The Holy Roman Empire, which comprised of present day Germany, Switzerland and Austria, saw in the aftermath of the Reformation a rise in public disillusionment in orthodox Catholicism and consequently, a massive surge in Protestant adherents (Doward n.p.), which led both warring sects to choose widespread witch trials as the tried-and-tested procedure to ascertain their salvatic monopoly via consolidation of positive public opinion from ruling ideologues of patriarchal societies.

Reinforced by the superstitions of God-fearing Europeans of 16<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century, the perpetuation of this particular brand of misogyny stemmed from a multitude of anti-witchcraft tracts – and one specific treatise took the communities by storm. Shortly after the Gutenberg Press was implemented and

the sociolinguistic arena of publishing would be revolutionized, 15<sup>th</sup> century Dominican Inquisitors Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger spawned the infamous *Malleus Maleficarum*, or the *Hammer of the Witch* in 1487. Built on extremist hypotheses about essentially non-Christian, pagan religiosity and its Devil-inspired, Godless, heathen *maleficia* laid out by preceding ecclesiastical texts such as Johannes Nider's *Formicarius* (1475) and Thomas Aquinus's *Summa Theologica* (1485), Kramer and Sprenger's text became a highly-recommended directive for juries supervising witch trials in the Continent regarding identification and execution of potential practitioners of witchcraft, partaking in a "gynocidal ritual" (Levack 451) that specifically targeted vulnerable women who deviated or appeared to deviate ever so slightly from iron-clad rules about expected, accepted feminine conduct.

While contemporary critique and authorship have multifariously dealt with the influence of standardized evidence of trials and anti-witch discourse on Early Modern to postwar historical fiction on witchcraft, Erika Mailman's *The Witch's Trinity* and Oliver Potzsch's *The Hangman's Daughter* set the acrimoniously misogynist phenomenon in Renaissance and Reformation-era Germany, both proving resolution in a message of hope and wish-fulfilment through vengeance against politico-religious aggression and ultimate rescue of some of the key victims, thus ending distinctively differently from the expected result of actual trials.

Incidentally, both Potzsch and Mailman are descendants of people directly involved in witch trials of transatlantic history, their fiction being liable to be considered part of or at least adjacent to the genre of genealogical/family history writings. Heavily influenced by the story of her Salem-born foremother's experience as a victim of false allegations of witchcraft, Erika Mailman superimposes her interest in her own kin onto a temporally and geographically separate territory without discounting the universally applicable significance of the witch-scares. In her story, Salem is replaced by Tierkendorf in Germany – possibly a fictionalization of the city of Trier "between 1587 and 1593 where at least 368 people were executed at the stake" (Nash 37) - and the 1690s Puritan America gives way to the Catholic control of Holy Roman Empire in early 16<sup>th</sup> century Central Europe. While one may argue about the possible reasons behind such anachronistic distantiation of the author from exploring something intimate to her own ancestral past, it does equip Mailman with the ability to investigate the immediate and direct effects of European anti-witch commandments like the *Malleus Maleficarum* on Continental witch trials, long before diluted versions of the same would cross over the Atlantic. While Mailman's novel refers to her family history in passing in the endnotes, the Germany-based writer Oliver Potzsch's occult thriller is structured as a memoir. He constructs a parallel history of his personal maternal ancestry of Bavarian executioners who had worked closely at the heels of the infamous Schongau witch trials of late 16<sup>th</sup> century (Guilford n.p.) and the Thirty Years' War. Embroiled in affairs of the state, Potzsch's forefather, the "hangman" Jacob Kuisl, strives to strike a balance

between two “necessities”: on the one hand, he must comply to the city jurisprudence’s orders to curb the unexpected restart of public suspicions by making an example out of putting a local midwife and healer to death; on the other, he is deeply affected by the prospect of any unnecessary and morally reprehensible act of violence towards the same defenseless victim of witchcraft allegations.

Kuisl’s strong desire of non-cooperation with the local officials who issue orders of subjecting the woman to painful torture, and his objective of bringing to justice the actual perpetrator(s) of the multiple orphan-murders wrecking the city, are primarily part of the imaginative reconstruction of the historicity of executioner clans operating in the continental Europe. However, the elements of forcefully wringing out a confession to the crime through brutal violence towards the accused, and the methods and instruments for State or Church-sanctioned persecution are part and parcel of the documented data available about the trials.

The confessions exacted through torture set off a “chain-reaction” of witch-hunts, “in which confessing witches, subjected to or threatened with additional torture, named their alleged accomplices. All these offenders were referred to as witches” (Levack 2). This predictable trope was subverted in both Pottsch and Mailman’s writings. *The Witch’s Trinity*’s protagonist Gude Muller, an aging, weak-bodied widow who was labeled witch soon after the burning of Kunne Himmelmann (one of her contemporaries and significantly, a Wise Woman/healer), proved herself to be a quick-witted and tenacious woman who successfully prolonged the time of the trials and in extension her life and the lives of her female family members, staving off further executions. *The Hangman’s Daughter* presented the primary accused Martha Stechlin, a sexagenarian apothecary, as someone able-minded and resilient enough to keep her integrity and honesty consistent throughout the plot. She refused to break under suffering to falsely confess either her own association or tattle about other innocent women to have them indicted. It is worth noting how the primary accused in both novels, old healers Himmelmann and Stechlin, had been the sole repositories of autodidactic yet advanced herbal knowledge, thus inspiring the distaste and disbelief of those who were trained in the ways of the *Malleus Maleficarum* which scoffed at the probabilities of women possessing legitimate medical skills. The existence of any such woman would have rung alarm bells in their collective myth of university-education of medicine being a male-only domain, where women were barred entry (Allen 10).

The gender-based discrimination which heavily penalized women was mostly inconspicuous until late 15<sup>th</sup> century. Even Pope Innocent VIII’s papal bull of 1484, where he strictly and explicitly condemned witchcraft, did not draw any distinction between men and women in their motives or usage of supernatural faculties (Zimmerman et al. 18). However, according to sociologist Nachman Ben-Yehuda:

Evidence indicates that the majority of the witch craze's victims were women. In one specific area in southwest Germany, females constituted 85% of all victims. [Historian Henry Lea claims in his] reports that in Switzerland "almost every woman was considered a wic" and in "(Weisensteig and Rottenberg), we find overwhelming proportions of women (98-100 per cent)." (6)

Mailman's world-building in *Tierkkindorf* kept close to this archetype in the accusations levelled against Kunne Himmelman and Gude Muller, with the former being charged with *maleficia* (as opposed to *beneficia*, Kallestrup 200), having apparently "[played] havoc with fertility... [and wreaked] vengeance" against those who menstruate, out of envy for her own inability to "partake in the cycle of birth" (Mailman 48). Societal demonization of menopausal women is a longstanding tactic of domination which reduces female-presenting bodies to the sole functionality of reproduction and carrying on the males' progeny, and the same had been at play behind the overwhelming number of aging (or supposedly infertile) women being easier and fetidly "justifiable" targets to kill. Muller on the other hand, had several allegations to fight off, including airborne movement and secret, sexual rendezvous with the Devil and his minions; these beliefs were hammered into her to the extent that she began questioning her own sanity and identity after hallucinating having committed the exact acts even though her rational mind knew them to be impossible. Many women's internalization of witch-lore as absolute truth (Goff 46), and subsequent unnecessary and irrational self-flagellation were useful in extracting false confessions.

In *The Hangman's Daughter*, Martha Stechlin was not the lone suspect in the minds of garrulous gossip-mongers. Kuisl's own daughter Magdalena, an apprentice healer herself studying under her father's tutelage, was extremely well-read and a quick learner of healing techniques who often proved herself far better than the town physicians, while additionally being physically attractive. She further possessed necessary skills for midwifery and abortions- a skill both respected and degraded as sacrilegious: "witches who are midwives in various ways kill the child conceived in the womb, or if they do not this, offer new-born children to devils" (Summers 144). Magdalena's existence provided a place of jealousy from not just the university-educated male doctors but even female neighbours, owing to which Magdalena became prime prey of intense mistrust, and any violence towards her was held back only because of her father's fearsome authority and popularity. From her thought processes presented by an omniscient narrator, the audience realizes that Magdalena was well aware of her identity being one misstep away from disrepute that would ultimately be a satisfactory enough reason to life-threatening torture particularly constructed for "deviant" women:

A woman who buried her nose in books was regarded with suspicion by the men. If she was the hangman's daughter on top of that and liked to flirt with the lads, then she wasn't far from the pillory and the scold's bridle. More than once, the hangman's wife had prophesied in the darkest tones how her

husband would have to clap his own daughter into the shrew's fiddle and lead her through town at the end of a rope. (Potzsch 23)

'Scolds' and 'shrews' generally referred to any woman who strayed from the parameters of "womanly", stereotypically submissive femininity that rejected any show of intellect, quick-wittedness or independence, all of which came to be either associated or interchangeable with sexual promiscuity and practice of *maleficia* or harmful witchcraft. The bridle, also known as the "witch's bridle", would pierce the tongue and rob her of speech and the ability to even eat, drink or express her pain if the wearer moved her head within the helmet structure (Sollee 154); while the fiddle would clasp her throat and her arms to restrict her motion completely (Rublack 75), enough to be at the mercy of anyone who wished to harm her. The torture instruments were specifically designed to make good on patriarchy's promise to inflict severe damage on the abilities of communication, sustenance and movement (both physically and metaphorically) of accused women. The very first victim of witchcraft allegations in *The Hangman's Daughter*, decades before the events of the novel, had been subjected to piercing of her breasts with flaming pincers (Potzsch 17): which was another instance of the inherently sexist and most definitely sexual, rape-adjacent nature of punishments for women. Stechlin herself goes through periodic bouts of torture to gouge a confession out of her- that she heroically tolerates- including multiple male juries strip-searching her for potential "witch's marks", and embedding thumbscrews under her fingernails (Potzsch 37). Both methods had been prescribed in the *Malleus Maleficarum* (Summers 20) as foolproof ways of extracting information from women. Old Himmelmann in *The Witch's Trinity* would have to suffer through intense "trial by ordeal" which required her to retrieve pebbles from under boiling water in a dubious assessment of her innocence, combined with shaving off of her body hair in front of a gawking, lecherous crowd; while her friend (and hence the victim of allegations of being an accomplice) Gude Muller finds fate testing her perspicacity when she is faced with impending brutalization at the hands of the Dominican friar. He shows her an instrument called the "Pear of Anguish", a weapon specifically designed to penetrate and rip women's reproductive tract to pieces. Malevolent, violent misogyny and the imagery of rape seep through the religious man's words, who (unsurprisingly) invokes the *Malleus Maleficarum* and explains the mechanism of the weapon with evident relish, as a ploy to corner Muller into falsely confessing out of fright:

The *Malleus Maleficarum* suggests showing the instruments of torture and then giving the witch a night to think about whether she will confess. So I am showing it to you [...] Think about the part of your woman's body, that is most sensitive. *The place where temptation and lust reside* [...] It is easily pressed into that part of you, when it is closed up and solid. It is not much wider than a man's prick and certainly far smaller than a babe's body. We can push it up, up, until you think, *you whore, that you are rutting again* [...] when I twist the pin at the bottom, you will feel these blades press against the walls of your woman's chasm. And the walls shall resist, so far as

they are able. And then, after a point, they will begin to tear. And *I will continue to twist the pin. I will twist it until the device is completely flattened, as you held it in your hands a moment ago. Your whore's passage will be in shreds.*" (Mailman 163, emphasis mine)

Using rape as punishment or a manipulation tactic during the witch hunts in Germany had its roots in Continental witch-lore which had vivid, explicit "warnings" about female sexuality as fearsome, aberrant and abhorrent: "All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable [...] the mouth of the womb, wherefore for the sake of fulfilling their lusts they consort even with the devils" (Summers 114).

This was out of extreme fear and perhaps envy at women's power of reproductive creation- a characteristic also attributed to divinity, and it was something that patriarchal systems needed to dominate in order to perpetuate a semblance of phallocentric societal control. The standardization of such torture was both deployed by secular courts as well as Church-ordained trials; critic Stephen Currie points out in *Medieval Punishment and Torture*:

'The official should obtain from all heretics he has captured a confession by torture,' reads a mid-1200s directive from Pope Innocent IV. Under these circumstances, a suspected witch or heretic could expect to be tortured, often brutally, if [she] would not admit guilt right away—regardless of the validity of the charge. (25)

Both Gude Muller and Martha Stechlin suffered- yet they withstood it and lived to tell the tale. Their knowledge of medicine came to significant advantage, even though it was ironically the governing reason behind their incarceration. Muller's friendship with the murdered Wise Woman Kunne Himmelman, and Stechlin's position as a self-taught woman-healer herself, had equipped both with enough familiarity of herbs and concoctions with anaesthetic properties that could significantly immune the user to excruciating pain even for a short while. Even though Muller, fortunately, did not need to use the tranquilizing "pille" she procured from Kunne's home, but could secretly pass some of it on to her friend before Kunne was immolated and killed (Mailman 107). Stechlin had Jacob Kuisl – the hangman himself- as a sympathizing support system, who slipped her sedatives she had supplies of back home, right before her torture began (Potzsch 32). The skill of prescribing and administering medicines was unacceptable in a woman, which further led to disbelief at the possibility of women-healers' ability to withstand torture and ward off attempts to extract confessions, to the extent that it was determined as merely another indicator of her cavorting with Satan. Hans Peter Broedel points out the inquisitor Heinrich Kramer's (Latinized as Henricus Inistoris) treatment of such "power", which had been touted in the *Malleus Maleficarum* :

To [Jacob] Sprenger [co-author of the *Malleus*], witchcraft depended upon this intimate bond between woman and demon, close even to the point of identity. In the *Malleus*, the account of Institoris' prosecutions of witches in Ravensburg describes precisely how this relationship was determined. They

report that about twenty-eight miles southeast of the town, a very severe hailstorm had damaged the fields and vines in a swathe a mile wide, so that for the space of three years scarcely anything would grow there. The people of the town suspected witchcraft, "and clamored for an inquisition." Institoris was duly summoned, and, after careful investigation, he seized two suspects, a bath-woman named Agnes and Anna of Mindelheim, whom he imprisoned separately. Agnes was interrogated first, but she stoutly proclaimed her innocence through "very light questioning." This clearly showed that Agnes, like many witches, was provided by the devil with maleficium taciturnitatis, the preternatural ability to withstand torture in silence, so it was undoubtedly due to the miraculous intervention of God that Agnes confessed, and Institoris happily recalls that when she "was suddenly freed and released from her chains, although in the place of torture, she laid bare all of the crimes which she had perpetrated." (Broedel 53)

Early modern Germany was fraught with year-length famines, intermittent bouts of the Black Plague and desperate, bloody wars which relentlessly reduced communities to smithereens, allowing recuperative time to neither the afflicted populace nor the economy. The city of Schongau in *The Hangman's Daughter* had found itself at the tail-end of major agrarian catastrophes of multiple famines conjoined with lingering tensions in the aftermath of the Thirty Years' War, influenced by evidence of:

[...] Climatic variations which hit the [Bavarian] region during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, causing harvest failures...and a marked decrease in the population of between one and two thirds. These agrarian and demographic disasters must be understood against the background of the Catholic Reformation and the Thirty Years' War. The effects of an unusually adverse climate may have exaggerated the anxieties experienced by both the population and the authorities during this period [...] that such natural occurrences may have influenced the course of the witch persecutions in Germany. (Durrant 15)

Tierkkindorf in *The Witch's Trinity* was hit by extreme famine post-Plague, and hunger forces people to lose the faculty of charity and rational thinking very quickly. At their wit's end, with less to none assistance from nearby well-off municipal areas, the starving villagers turned to the only avenue they felt was available to them: debridement of defenseless, unemployable older women who had outlived their reproductive abilities, in return for food and resources. This was provided by the Dominican Inquisitor who had arrived with a purpose of his own: to settle his authority as a revered, powerful religious figure and earn the praise of the higher Church officials by sweeping out anyone he could remotely connect to devilry. The promise of a paltry meal was enough to persuade Gude Muller's starving daughter-in-law Irmeltrud to plot her murder, or at the least be an accomplice to it by preparing the wooden stake for Gude's burning even before her arraignment. Unfortunately enough, Irmeltrud was unaware of the impending suspicion towards herself because of her proven betrayal of a close relative:

Irmeltrud was staring into the fire [...] She muttered to herself. “The friar [has food]. He brought some store with him when he came. We have to please him.” The children had fallen asleep on the hearth. I would have carried them to bed but was too frail to lift them. Irmeltrud could have managed but was lost in reverie. “Cut the wood for him,” she whispered. In the half-light, her head moved not, but her eyes slid over, smoothly as the door creeping open, until she stared at me from the corners of her eyes. (Mailman 135)

Upon investigating similar strains of situational coercion and manipulation in Oliver Potzsch’s novel, there seem to be two specific reasons behind the witch-cry of terrorized townspeople who repeated the age-old cliché of scapegoating the most disenfranchised subjects when they could not find a rational solution to their poverty, suffering, and the unprovoked, grotesque murder of their heirs. Previously unrecorded allegations of atmospheric magic and element-manipulation were added to the imagined repertoire of witches in Central European lore in 15<sup>th</sup> century, reflecting the fear stemming from regions affected by severe weather turbulence during the “Little Ice Age” (Behringer 159), which is adequately represented in the description of Schongau ravaged by harsh climate conditions:

In the last four years, crops had twice been practically annihilated by *hailstorms*. In May of last year, a terrible *rainstorm* had caused the Lech to flood, and the town mill had been washed away. Since then, Schongauers had to take their grain to [nearby city] Altenstadt or even more distant towns to be ground, which, of course, was more expensive. Many fields in the nearby villages were left *fallow*, and farms lay abandoned. A *third of the population had died of the plague or hunger in the past decades*. Those who could, kept livestock in their houses and lived on cabbage and turnips from their own kitchen gardens. (Potzsch 27, emphasis mine)

When the buildings near the trading posts in Schongau were burned down, Stechlin found herself being blamed once more for apparently manipulating elemental fire, even though she had already been imprisoned with no access to the outside.

Secondly, witchcraft had always been a politico-religious weapon to pressure public adherence to dominant social groups which are under pressure from any form of potential defiance that may prove to be a barrier in their way of sustaining their exploitative, avaricious schemes. In “Witch Hunt as Cultural Change Phenomenon”, Thomas Schoeneman theorizes such fear to exist in direct causation of ‘reorientation and the development’ of emergent demonologies:

The conservative mazeway change of reorientation involves an altered perception of self, environment, and culture that seeks the causes of misfortune outside of established social institutions. Reorientation occurs in individuals deeply loyal to and/or actively involved in those institutions that are threatened (by loss of credibility, challenging movements, etc.); it is a gradual and nondeliberate change and is probably the course that is most natural and least destructive to individual and corporate Gestalts.

Threatened groups gradually evolve explanations of misfortune (demonologies) and remedial proposals (witch hunts), which are then submitted to the public and actively promoted. (Schoeneman 537)

*The Hangman's Daughter* shows the exact orchestrations of “threatened groups”- namely the political placeholders who fear impending loss of property and power in the face of public ire. Working to manipulate peoples’ sense of righteous anger into vindictiveness against a soft target, they would move the focus away from either the failure of the city administration in either preventing the killings or providing justice to the aggrieved, or to cover up the involvement of influential officials in the murders. Another purpose would have been to stem the snowballing effect of witchcraft accusations which, if left unchecked, would not stop before multiple innocent women were penalized for it, as it had been decades ago in the historic Schongau trials of 1589-92:

Nearly seventy years ago during the famous Schongau witch trial, dozens of women had been burned at the stake. What had started as an angry outburst and a few unexplained deaths had ended in mass hysteria, with everyone accusing everyone else. Back then, [Kuisl’s] grandfather Jörg Abriel had beheaded more than sixty women, and afterward their bodies were burned. This had made [certain aldermen] rich and famous [...] The people would keep looking for signs. And even if there were no more deaths, there would be no end to the suspicion. A wildfire that could lay the whole of Schongau in ashes. Unless someone confessed and agreed to take the blame [...] : Martha Stechlin. (Potzsch 46, emphasis mine)

Witchcraft accusations were often used to corner rivals in the game of political supremacy, as in the years preceding James I’s reign in England in early 17<sup>th</sup> century, when the incumbent monarch himself had authored the infamous *Demonologie* (1599) to foreground his targeted execution and imprisonment of women associated with highly influential people he considered to be impediments to a smooth annexation of the Scottish and English thrones (Tyson 5). *The Hangman's Daughter* specifically deals with multiple confrontational situations created between Schongau merchants and Augsburg traders: situations that escalate to the point of potentially disrupting many councilmen’s avenue of amassing and maintaining their fortune. To the amoral officials, the only way out is to cut losses: to direct the guilt wrongly upon an unsuspecting, easily eliminated patsy in order to pacify an increasingly hysterical, rebellious crowd who had already begun questioning the competence of town law enforcement in their task of bringing the murderer(s) to justice. The Schongau officials were keenly aware of the wildfire-effect that accusations might have if not nipped at the bud, as the present scenario had brought to their mind the previous witch trials when even a high-society landowners’ and judges’ wives weren’t spared: it had been “the shame of Schongau”(Potzsch 52). This seems to closely parallel the account of the city of Ellwangen in southern Germany in 1611:

Beginning with a woman of 70 who was tortured into confessing to witchcraft, many people were condemned and executed after being forced into naming accomplices in a savage process which reached further and

further up the social ladder. Once some priests had been condemned, it was no longer clear who could and who could not be a witch; some people even seem to have made spontaneous confessions of their own guilt. In 1611 some 100 were executed, then a further 160 in the following year. A judge who protested after his wife was accused and executed was himself tortured and executed in November 1611. (Scarre and Callow 27)

Potzscht and Mailman's ancestral connections with transnational witch-hunts played a significant role in their attempt to conceive a semi-optimistic closure for the main accused, making them survive unbearable misery and outlive it, marking their steadfastness and quick-thinking. Potzscht's main objective was to characterize his forefather Jacob Kuisl as a sympathetic man who tries his best to help solve the murder cases in order to protect the "witch" he was supposed to kill. He tries to question the stereotype of the hangmen's work which had required nigh zero empathy to quickly and unthinkingly execute legalized killings. While doing so, the author (intentionally or not) brings to light the plight of well-read women and double standards operating in society when the reverent attitudes towards university educated male doctors and even towards the hack remedies that Kuisl himself provided, had turned into disgust for women who were and did the same. Mailman, on the other hand, being the descendant of a Salem victim, proceeded to deal with her grief in a slightly removed manner. She reimagines a wholly different setting with completely new characters ensconced in the same circumstances of extreme poverty, hunger, scapegoating and loss of reason- because witch-hunting is a cultural gyric motion that has consistently repeated itself over and over again across civilizations and across time.

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## **“SHIFTING LANDSCAPES OF CHILDHOOD”: SITUATING THE IDENTITY OF ILA IN TERMS OF PLACE AND SPACE IN AMITAV GHOSH’S *THE SHADOW LINES***

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the role of place and space in the development of the identity of the character of Ila in Amitav Ghosh’s “The Shadow Lines”. It posits the hypothesis that the nature of an individual’s identity can be understood through his/her attachment or alienation to a place, and the phenomenological experiences involved in living or practising these spaces. The paper first provides a literature review of the various discourses on space and place, especially from the disciplines of anthropology and sociology. These disciplines focus on the ethnographic perspectives of lived spatial experiences, thereby contributing to the concepts of place identity, place attachment and placelessness. This is followed by a close reading of Ghosh’s novel to illustrate how the characters of Ila and Tridib are moulded by the places/spaces they occupy. Second, this paper considers how Ghosh exploits the medium of the different images and stories, as narratorial tools to raise questions of belonging and attachment through the contrasting characters of Ila and Tridib.

**Key words :** identity, place, placelessness, non-place, place-attachment, space, spatial practice.

Identity conventionally has long been the preserve of psychology. In the many post modern critical theories, identity has been variously considered to be gendered (performative), or a psychological, linguistic or social construct. However, with the renewed interest in “spatial turn” the formation of identity has received considerable attention, ranging from anthropology, cognitive sciences, geography, and psychology. A number of scholars, working in the above mentioned disciplines have demonstrated that identity formation, to some measure, is dependent upon the place to which an individual belongs. A place has its own agency, through which it shapes the realities and identities of the characters. In their introduction to “*Place and Identity*”, Jen Jack Gieseking et. al note that, “Place and identity are inextricably bound to one another. The two are co-produced as people come to identify with where they live, shape it [...] creating distinctive environmental biographies” (73). The authors further contend that an

exploration of the relationship between place and identity yields a better understanding of identity formation with regard to the function that place has in social and psychological development (Giesecking et al. 73). Following their line of thought, it can be hypothesised that any individual, whose childhood has witnessed an inexorable progression from place to place, will have difficulties in forming a composite personality, and/or identity. This paper tries to validate this hypothesis, first by foregrounding the various theoretical perspectives on space and place, its importance and role in the formation of identities, and then attempt an analysis of the identity of Ila in Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines*. The paper undertakes a close textual reading of the novel to undermine the clues that reveal the author's representation of identity in terms of space and place.

In Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator's reminiscences of Ila's childhood travels, attitudes, and memories seem innocuous at a cursory glance, but rather become instrumental in understanding the character of Ila, and thereby, constructing her identity.

## II

In spatial terms, any meaningful inquiry into identity by necessity, has to engage with the issues of space and place. Theoretical concerns with identity or personality formation has exclusively been the preserve of psychology up to the initial decades of the twentieth century. But with the theorisations of space and spatial negotiations (Lefebvre 1991; Foucault 1976; Tuan 1977; de Certeau 1984), and placelessness (Relph 1976) and non-places (Auge 1995), the spatial turn undergoes a phenomenological/ globalised reorientation with an increased attention towards the meanings that lived experiences contribute towards defining places and spaces.

The conventional notion regarding space was essentialist and sedentary (Üngür 3). Space was considered as an empty container, passive to the actions or events that unfolded within it. The western logos – foregrounding temporality – had considered space to be static, relying mostly on Euclidean geometry, and later, on the Cartesian system of spatial-temporal measurement. Lefebvre's Marxist analysis of these conventional views of space enabled him to hypothesize that social space was actually a product that could be socially produced in a capitalist society. Similarly, Foucault, as early as 1976, commented on the space/time binary, when he claimed that "space was treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile. Time on the contrary, was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic" (70). Paul Carter, the Australian historian using an analogy from Shakespeare's *As You Like it* compared the world to a stage and "all the men and women merely players", to describe the dominant mode of modernity's narrative, which he calls "imperial history" that singularly "reduces space to a stage, that pays attention to events unfolding in time alone..." (Carter qtd. in Wagner 234). These instances demonstrate the shifting trajectory of

thinking and theorising about space as a distinct branch of enquiry, separate from the concerns of the temporal.

With the shift in the critical inquiry from the abstract concepts of ‘space’ to a more focussed idea of ‘place’, multiple approaches to defining place are observed. David Manuel Navarrete and Michael Redclift, in their paper, “The Role of Place in the Margins of Space” claim that renewed interest in spatial studies focus more towards the “human dimension of spatiality” (3), seen across various disciplines. They undertake an elaborate literature review of the multiple definitions and meanings of the word “place” to conclude that it is not possible or desirable to arrive at a specific and distinctive definition of place, but can rather be concurred that “places are more than geographic settings with physical or spatial characteristics; they are fluid, changeable, dynamic contexts of social interaction and memory” (3).

Building upon the fluidity of the characteristics of place, Navarette and Redclift mention J.A. Agnew’s work to highlight the “relationship between place and human behaviour” (3). According to Agnew, a place is made up of the elements of “location, locale and sense of place”, while also constituting the processes of the “economic, institutional, and socio-cultural” (Navarette and Redclift 3-4). According to Navarette and Redclift, Agnew’s interpretation looks at a place’s location as the geopolitical element, playing a part in the “world economy”; locale is identified with the “institutional setting of the place” and the sense of place is understood as the created identities and meanings that are given within places (4).

They also refer to Linda McDowell who considers the meaning and importance of place to be “contextual”, suggesting that its significance is dependent upon certain issues and relevant social relations (Navarette and Redclift 2). These multiple illustrations lead Navarette and Redclift to contend that a place cannot be described in terms of the relative location of objects, but must involve an integration of location and meaning in the context of human action (3).

Similarly, in the “Introduction” to *People, Place, and Space Reader*, Gieseking et al. deal with the multiple meanings and theorisations regarding the definitions and relationships of places and people. They theorise space and place as dynamic, being created and recreated through the actions and meanings of people. They define place beyond its material and geographical aspects to incorporate socio-cultural “forms and practices as well as affective experience(s)” (xx). If space is defined as abstract and continuous, place becomes the static reference point in the life of individuals, imbued with the “qualities that give people a sense of belonging” (Gieseking et al. xx). Jo Vergunst, in his paper titled “Phenomenology of Space and the Environment”, traces the theoretical origins of the definitions of place to the Heidegger’s “being-in-the-world” philosophy (1). He also states that places are imbued with meaning because of the foundations of “consciousness and perception” (2). In other words, places are permeated with

meaning because of the embodied experiences of the people inhabiting them (Vergunst 4). It is evident from these definitions, that spaces and places need to be lived in, and therefore, experienced phenomenologically to make sense of them.

In the humanistic perspective, the phenomenological explanations towards understanding and experiencing places were propounded by Yi Fu Tuan, when he spoke of people identifying places because of its distinct “spirit and personality”(409). Additionally, Tuan also mentions the “sense” of a place, generated because of their visual or aesthetic judgements in seeing a site or a location (410).

This phenomenological perspective was further explored by Edward Relph, who theorised the concept of placelessness and insideness/outsideness, with respect to inhabiting a place. In the Preface to *Place and Placelessness* (1976), Relph identifies the various ways in which “places are experienced” and argues that “distinctive and diverse places are manifestations of a deeply felt involvement with those places by the people who live in them, and that for many such a profound attachment to place is as necessary and significant as a close relationship with other people” (Preface). Relph examines the different components and intensities of place experiences in terms of a sense of belonging, place attachment and rootedness along with meaning and affinity for childhood places. He demonstrates that the profound psychological connections between people and places emerge from an authentic sense of place, that emanates from “insideness, from a sense of belonging to a place and its community, but one that is not overly self-conscious” (Relph qtd. in Liu and Freestone 3). In *Place and Placelessness Revisited* (2016), Edgar Liu and Robert Freestone in their essay “Revisiting Place and Placelessness”, observe that Relph’s notion of a sense of place is actuated through an “extended association ... often articulated as a sense of identity with a place” (5). This association can be best illustrated through the development of an affinity for the place where one is born and raised. They also note that Relph’s revision of the definition of a sense of place (in the 1991 edition) is a more inclusive and enlarged one. The sense of a place, according to Relph, is “an innate faculty, possessed in some degree by everyone, that connects us to the world” (Relph qtd. in Liu and Freestone 5). It is a learned awareness that people use to understand the world and the changes that inform its “environment, economy and politics” (Liu and Freestone 5).

Liu and Freestone further explain Relph’s concepts of place affinity or a sense of place through the binary of “insideness and outsideness” (6). The feeling of being inside a place requires a greater degree of association rather than possessing a sense of place. In other words, there needs to be an immersive experience of the place through the physical body and the senses. This experience generates the individual’s sense of the place, thereby enabling them to *identify* with the place more deeply. In contrast, Relph defines outsideness as the “lack of identity with a place” (Liu and Freestone 6), and categorises different degrees of outsideness/ insideness on the basis of how intimately the individual can/ not

identify with the place. According to him, existential outsideness is the weakest form of identification with a place that “involves a selfconscious [sic] and reflective uninvolvement and alienation from people and places, homelessness, sense of unreality of the world, and of not belonging. From such a perspective, places cannot be significant centres of existence, but are at best backgrounds to activities that are without sense, mere chimeras, and at worst are voids” (Relph 51).

Identification with a place involves the factors of rootedness and care for the place. An individual's bonding with a place in terms of personal and communal experiences involves a kind of familiarity that results not only from knowledge of the place, but also being known in that particular place. It is this attachment which constitutes an individual's roots in a place (Relph 37). Relph emphasizes the need of having roots in a place as an “important human need”, and substantiates his contention through an extended citation from Simone Weil:

To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognised need of the human soul. [...] A human being has roots by virtue of his real active and natural participation in the life of the community. [...] This participation is a natural one in the sense that it is automatically brought about by place, conditions of birth, profession and social surrounding. (Weil qtd. in Relph 38)

Having roots in a place offers a vantage point from which one can look out on the world, and understand their position in the environment surrounding them, thereby providing them the agency to construct their own reality.

The sense of attachment of places develops at a nascent stage of childhood. According to Relph, places for children constitute the edifice on which “the discovery of the self” (11) is founded, thus becoming the vital reference points “which serve to recall particular personal experiences” though the setting may not be the part of those experiences (37). His insights into the phenomenological experience of place and its role in constructing identity, also extends to another phenomenon termed as placelessness.

From the literature review, it follows that place does not connote the conventional signification of being a portion of a static geographical marker. It is rather a fluid, dynamic entity containing within itself multiple contexts of social interactions and memory, while also simultaneously acquiring psychological and cognitive meanings through phenomenological experiences.

This paper therefore considers Relph's concept of placelessness, alongside the tangential concepts of non-places, first written by Michel de Certeau and later theorised by Marc Augé to analyse Ila's various journeys as depicted in Ghosh's novel. This paper aims to demonstrate that the experiences and memories of the different international airports that the character of Ila has traversed, also echo the concepts of placelessness and non-places. This shall be achieved by a close reading of the representation of Ila's identity, which is portrayed in the novel primarily through the use of imagination and invention.

### III

In the opening section of the novel, the unnamed narrator reflects upon the nature of Ila, his paternal aunt who, he thinks, has never properly occupied any place by living or experiencing it cognitively or psychologically. She has never been able to bond with various people, or form an attachment with the places or environments that she has been to in course of her childhood travels. Ila's inability to form "place attachment – the bonding of people to places" (Altman and Low 2) stems from her incapacity to connect to the various places that she has lived in or travelled through. She is the daughter of a career diplomat, Himangshushekhar Dutta-Chaudhuri, the Indian Consul General. Being a diplomat, a larger degree of his career was spent travelling and living abroad. The nature of his profession frequently carried him and his family to different places alien to his culture or land. As a consequence Ila found herself uprooted from one place to another, enrolled and subsequently transferred from one elite public school to another. Her childhood experiences as shared with the narrator were a succession of short lived memories, often confused and overlapping. Her inability to forge lasting friendships or preserve memories of either people or places turned her into a restless soul ever in search of some moorings, whether psychological or emotional. In the words of the narrator:

I could not persuade her that *a place does not merely exist, that it has to be invented in one's imagination*; that her practical bustling London was no less invented than mine, neither more nor less true, only very far apart. It was not her fault that she could not understand, for Tridib often said of her, the inventions she lived in moved with her, so that although she had lived in many places, she had never travelled at all. (Ghosh 21; emphasis added)

The paucity of Ila's spatial experiences deny her to form place-identity and place attachment, two concepts which can be used to gain a better understanding of Ila's childhood predicament. Place-identity and place attachment are terms given by Harold M. Proshansky, Abby K. Fabian and Robert Kaminoff. They conceptualise these to be a "sub-structure of self-identity" which enable an individual to broadly acquire knowledge and feeling of the physical space through cognitive means of "memories, ideas, feelings, attitudes, values" (Proshansky et.al. 77). It may also include other ways through which people relate to the various complexities of their physical settings that define their diurnal experiences. Place-identity helps in fostering a sense of belonging and attachment, as well as creating meaning. It consists of "an endless variety of cognitions related to the past, present, and anticipated physical settings that define and circumscribe" the everyday existence of the person (Proshansky et al. 77). Moreover, Irving Altman and Setha Low also define place attachment in terms of "an interplay of affect and emotions, knowledge and beliefs, and behaviours and actions to a place" (5).

Dolores Hayden, writing in "Urban Landscape History-The Sense of Place and Politics of Space" also employs the term "place attachment" following Altman and Low, who have considered it a psychological process almost similar to the

natural bonding or attachment that a child has to its parents. Their conceptualisation of place attachment is a pointer to the “ways in which people connect to various places, and the effects of such bonds in identity development, place-making, perception, and practice” (Hayden 82). Moreover, such an attachment can “develop social, material and ideological dimensions, as individuals develop ties to kin and community, own or rent land, and participate in public life as residents of a particular community” (Hayden 82).

It follows from the above discussion that both these concepts can to some degree, decode the reason behind people’s sense of comfort, or homeliness in certain places, and their experiences of a sense of disconnect at other places. A strong sense of place attachment usually develops from a sense of control of some part of the physical environment. Such a control is deemed necessary in the formation of a positive identity of the self, a process that commences from early childhood, as observed by Clare Cooper Marcus: “For children, their bed, their ‘cubby’ at day care, or a secret ‘den’ in the woods may be the start of feeling there is a place that is truly theirs” (88). A loss of the sense of place attachment can also be responsible for the excruciating trauma that is generally associated with displacement whether under violent circumstances, or of one’s own volition.

In *The Shadow Lines*, Ila’s character suffers from a sense of disconnect and ‘outsideness’ (as coined by Relph) in whatever place she finds herself to be. For instance, on those rare occasions when the Dutta-Chaudhuri family arrives in India and they visit their ancestral home, Ila finds herself insouciantly detached from the flow of excitement and activities that unfold. Quite understandably, her sole companion is the narrator who happens to be of the same age. In his company Ila would “slip away to the shade of the rusty water tank on the roof of their house” (Ghosh 21). Both the children, well ensconced in the shade would seek to share the mysteries of their lives - Ila passing on information about her school and the distant places that she has been to, while the narrator eagerly imbibing and inscribing every iota of information in his imagination, to be invented later. It is on these occasions that Ila would show him her so-called “souvenirs”, which would always be her school yearbooks of the international school that she happened to be studying at that time. The narrator realises that in all the pictures of her yearbooks Ila would always point out certain individuals and flaunt their names who would invariably be either “most beautiful, the most talented, the most intelligent girls in the school” (Ghosh 22). The one commonality in these pictures was that Ila would be conspicuous by her absence in them. At the age of fourteen Ila had shown him the picture of her current crush, who happened to be a handsome boy apparently quite popular among the girls. However, the narrator finds after a few pages, in a group photograph of the class, the heart throb is in the front row with his arms thrown around the shoulders of two blonds, while Ila has been marginalised to the “edge of the back row, standing a little apart, unsmiling, in a plain grey skirt, with a book under her arm” (Ghosh 23). On realising that the narrator had noticed her marginalisation, she quietly removed the page from the yearbook later. This trivial piece of

information reveals Ila's position as someone occupying the fringes, away from the popular people in her class. This shows her experiences of outsideness, and subsequent alienation, as she was that person who wasn't important enough to figure in the foreground of the picture. Her awareness of her position as the marginal outsider was amplified when she removed any trace of her outsideness from the yearbook, which was the permanent and *only* record of her existence in occupying that place. This reveals how she did not even find her own existence worth remembering in concrete mediums such as the photograph, nor did she develop any attachment to the place, or the boarding school she resided in.

In course of her various travels and residing in different locations, she has rarely felt places cognitively, or to use Relph's term, has ever developed a sense of place by "being inside a place". For Relph being "inside a place is to belong to it and identify with it" (49). Later, he defines the sense of place as an "innate faculty" to comprehend the ever changing realities of the world of/around an individual (Relph qtd. in Liu and Freestone 5). Thus Ila fails to develop a sense of the places she inhabited, because she never was able to ground herself in a place for long enough to *develop* the innate faculty needed to cultivate a sense of a place. The experiences of Ila's character can thus be read as a representation of Relph's concept of existential outsideness. Furthermore, it can be seen that Ila's state of existential outsideness even develops into a state of placelessness - of "not belonging anywhere, of being an outsider or a refugee" (Liu and Freestone 6), as exemplified in the narrator's telling of the yearbook incident.

Relph's initial coinage of the term placelessness was intended to be used as an opposition to felt involvement with places, in the wake of the loss of familiar and established geographical spaces like landscapes which were destroyed for creating urban spaces. In this context he employs placelessness in the sense of a "casual eradication of distinctive places and the making of standardized landscapes that results from an insensitivity to the significance of place" (Preface). Subsequently, this results in the fading of various experiences and identities which were characteristic of the original places. Relph's contention implies the process of reductionism that characterizes urbanization. In such a process, all topographical elements that act as familiar markers of individuality or figure as distinctive spaces, are ruthlessly obliterated and replaced with a uniformity of structures, thereby rendering them identical and unfamiliar. Such uniformity creates disorientation and emphasizes lack of a phenomenological sense of place that can be experienced by an individual. Placelessness then, according to Relph, is a "weakening of the identity of place to the point where they not only look alike but feel alike and offer the same bland possibilities for experience" (90).

Relph had initially used the architectural structure of modern airports to concretize the notion of placelessness. He maintains that placelessness manifests in "uniformity and standardization in places," and regards the homogenized ambience and architecture of airport terminals to be formless lacking "human scale and order in places" (118-119). His objection to such spaces is their

anonymity and exchangeability which substitute “direct experience with an other directedness of artefactual representations designed for outsiders. They substitute uniformity and standardization for diversity. There is formlessness and lack of human scale, impermanence and instability” (Liu and Freestone 2-3). Borrowing the term “other directed architecture” from J B Jackson, Relph argued that the homogenized airport terminals are deliberately planned architectures that are “directed towards outsiders, spectators, passer-by, and above all consumers” (93).

Relph’s concepts of placelessness has also been echoed in the conceptualisation of non-places by Marc Auge. He uses the term non-places to indicate certain spaces that are not themselves “anthropological places” (78). While Relph’s concept of placelessness emphasizes the lack of a sense of place experienced by an individual, Auge accentuates the lack of social relations in his definition of “non-place”. He contends that “if a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place” (Auge 77-78). Auge’s concern is with the phenomenological conditions of “supermodernity [which] produce non-places, meaning spaces which are not themselves anthropological places and which, unlike Baudelairean modernity, do not integrate the earlier places: instead they are listed, classified, promoted to the status of ‘places of memory’, and assigned to a circumscribed and specific position” (78). Such non-places do not exist in ‘pure form’, and in it, places are reconstituted by themselves, relations are restored and resumed (Auge 78). Auge considers place and non-place to be opposed polarities, a set of conflicting relations in which “the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed; they are like palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity is ceaselessly written” (Auge 79).

The trajectory of Ila’s evolving identity in relation to her frequent mobility, both as a child and an adult, is analysed in the context of placelessness, and “non-places”. In one of his reminiscences, the narrator recalls listening raptly to the names and experiences of far off places that Ila, her father or her grandfather would talk of. The narrator would be thrilled as he tried to visualise those spatial vistas in his imagination, but Ila would seem unaffected by the recollection of those places. They had “for her a familiarity no less dull than the Lake” in Calcutta had, for the narrator (Ghosh 20). Ila’s lack of association with places stems from her inability to form place attachment; she inhabits various places, but was never able to experience them emotionally and cognitively or invent them in her imagination, as the narrator prefers to call it. For her a place was just a mere geographical location, there was no urgency or immediacy for her to invent or feel any sensory or cognitive perception.

Every individual negotiates with a place through their individual sensory stimuli such as sight, sounds, smells, and feelings, which remain embedded in the memory. Some particular sensations, visual, auditory or olfactory, may be associated with a specific event occurring in remote space and time, and are

sometimes liberated later as recollections. In contrast to Ila, the characters of Tridib and the unnamed narrator have always immersive experience of the spaces they occupy. Thus Tridib develops the unique ability to "invent the places in imagination" (Ghosh 21), a stratagem he taught the narrator, who learned to visualise spaces even before physically inhabiting them, an attribute that Relph calls "vicarious insideness". It is the ability to "experience places in a secondhand (sic) or vicarious way, that is, without actually visiting them..." (52) The reference to his first visit to London, and his almost mystic ability to find streets and other landmarks (solely on the basis of his memory and imagination) bears testimony to his "vicarious insideness", his ability of being there through imagination. On the other hand, Ila is a bewildered character often restless, as though in search of roots. Her attitude of disinterest and her inability to form lasting relationships stems from her sense of placelessness. Ironically, Ila's only sense of place or fixity is located in airport terminals, which have been critiqued by Relph and Auge as sites of placelessness and non-places. The only fixed memory that Ila seems to have of her childhood travels are the locations of the "Ladies" at different airport departure lounges and arrival halls. She on one occasion tells the narrator that she could distinctly remember that the "Ladies" in the Cairo airport was "way away on the other side of the departure lounge" (Ghosh 20). For her, the "Ladies" in the various airport terminals were important not because she wanted to use them, but because they were the "only fixed points in the shifting landscape of her childhood" (Ghosh 20). In her life of relentless mobility Ila could not forge any association either with the places she inhabited, or with the people she came in contact with. The nature of her diplomat father's vocation did not give her any sense of stability or sufficient time in which she could live in those spaces, or negotiate with those spaces on a deeper level. Her short tenures in the various schools that she had attended, instead of providing any stay against confusion, had only exacerbated her bewilderment. In her "shifting landscapes of childhood" (Ghosh 20), travelling became a part of herself and being - she had grown accustomed to movement and unlike other children for whom travels signify thrill, Ila remained unmoved.

In order to unpack the nature of Ila's identity, it is necessary to focus on her spatio-temporal travels and social mobility. The nature of her various travels were always similar, the only hiatus between these transits would be the non-places of the airport terminals, where ironically, she could find some semblance of stability, some kind of mooring to which she could desperately hold on to. The placelessness of the airport spaces would invariably have the ladies somewhere within the hall or lobby of arrival or departure spaces. Ila came to realise that the only definite and reliable thing she could be certain of would be these places, as though, to assure her of her uncertainties. Ila lacked the faculty to realise that each airport had a homogenized built environment, with similar architectural design strikingly devoid of any local identity or connections. Although she could not appreciate that all the terminals had their universal spatial perspectives and designs, yet she would know that the "Ladies" would be "hidden away in some yet more unexpected corner of the hall" (20). For Ila, and most travellers like her,

most of the architectural markers within the airport lounges remain unacknowledged for their assumed similarity; their presence is not perceived subjectively thus rendering them irrelevant. Such sign posts at the airport non-places are not objects that Ila's subjective self becomes conscious of, but rather they just become inconsequential signifiers that simply exist without any meaning for the subject.

Yet the fact remains that Ila could never develop the practice of inhabiting spaces, or "spatial practices" that Lefebvre deems necessary because it "ensures continuity and some degree of cohesion" (Lefebvre 33). Spatial practice is relevant for creating social space because it "embraces production and reproduction" (33). Spatial practices are required not only for possessing knowledge of a particular location but are also perceived to be characteristic of a given social formation. In the case of Ila, her interactions with any place are not evolved because of the selective engagements - either consciously or unconsciously - with her environment. Moreover, she is unable to comprehend the concept of place-identity, because place identity involves something far beyond memories, feelings, and "interpretations of each of the real world physical settings" (Proshansky et al. 78). Ila's negotiations with the place settings were wrought with spatial differences that are activity relevant and are defined by what her actions are expected to be either when she is alone or with other individuals.

In her later years as an adult, Ila continues to be alienated from the places she frequents the most – London in this instance – due to the absence of place-identity, as well as place-attachment. Decades later, when the narrator meets her in London, she intends to take him out somewhere, a film or to a new Vietnamese restaurant in Maida Vale, but the narrator desires to visit the underground railway station because that is a place etched in his memory through the innumerable descriptions provided by Tridib. The narrator takes his time, he imbibes every sensation, whether stepping on to the escalator or absorbing the "smell of electricity and dampness and stale deodorant", stopping to listen to the music or looking intently at the flashing advertisement (Ghosh 21). The narrator's deeply immersive and sensorial experiences are highly absurd to Ila; to her the metro is merely a means of transportation bereft of any significance. She fails to comprehend the medium of imagination used by the narrator to constantly invent and experience places. Invention and imagination are the terms that Ghosh uses to suggest what Navarrete and Redclift have called "the human dimension of spatiality", and "vicarious insideness" by Relph. Ila's character or identity then, is as tenuous as her dysfunctional sense of spatial non-attachment and non belonging to any place. She suffers from "existential outsideness" which Relph defines as a kind of "selfconscious (sic) and reflective uninvolvement, an alienation from people and places, homelessness, a sense of not belonging". Such a state denies perspective and significance to places as "[the] centres of existence, but are at best backgrounds to activities that are without sense, mere chimeras, and at worst are voids" (51).

In sharp contrast to Ila’s “existential outsideness”, Tridib and the narrator are endowed with “existential insideness” that “characterises belonging to a place and the deep and complete identity with a place that is the very foundation of place concept” (Relph 55). Both of them possess place identity cognition skills, which according to Proshansky and others, are capable of expressing and reflecting their individual physical settings along with their properties. The place identity cognitions not only support the physical settings, but also directly become relevant to the social roles and attributes that go to define the person and his mode of behaviour. Although Tridib has travelled widely spending much of his time in London, he remains firmly tethered to Calcutta, to its streets, sights, and noises. He knows implicitly that this where he belongs (Relph 55). Tridib frequently returns to his favourite street corners to regale his old friends who sorely feel his prolonged absence, with stories of his travels and experiences. It also helps that Tridib is an archaeologist, for being one requires a passion for places, particularly antiquated localities; and Tridib in his imagination invents and inhabits those spaces. He has shared this gift of place attachment with the narrator, who develops the uncanny ability to inhabit the places in his imagination even before he has actually visited them. This talent is on display when he visits London for the first time and identifies the streets and corners of the city. He even recognises Nick Price, whom he meets for the first time and of whom he has heard so often in his childhood that he claims to have almost grown up with him.

In summing up, the forces that have shaped Ila’s nature are her “existential outsideness” along with a conspicuous absence of place attachment and place identity, two vital attributes that inform the spatial decoding of her character. Tridib and the narrator on the other hand possess an abundance of these traits which give meaning and enrich their beings. Tridib and the narrator’s phenomenological ability to live and experience places by inventing them in their imaginations yield rich dividends, while Ila’s inadequacies of the same is like a bad debt that continues to accrue interest.

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## **“THE PICTURE OF ORYX LOOKING”: THE RETURNED GAZE AS FEMINIST RESISTANCE AGAINST THE MALE GAZE IN MARGARET ATWOOD’S *ORYX AND CRAKE***

**Cr Patricia Mary Hodge**

### **Abstract**

Using Laura Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze, the post-colonial interpretation of the “oriental” woman and the visual aspect of the photograph, this paper situates the politics of the gaze within a dystopian, consumerist setting that commodifies the female body, specifically through the politics of sexual desire and control. Within this framework, the paper reveals how the gaze can displace the conventional ways of seeing by lingering in that ambivalent space between resistance and complicity, by establishing Atwood’s female character Oryx’s gaze towards the camera as an act of disrupting the male fantasies of ownership and of voyeuristic looking. The act of looking back is also associated with the appropriation of the masculine qualities of ownership and control. The focal point of the paper is how the notions of looking and being looked at can alternatively function as modes of female empowerment and disempowerment, especially in the realm of sexuality and bodily autonomy.

**Keywords :** gaze, looking, objectification, image, Oryx, consumerism, dystopia

When Laura Mulvey first emphasized the overarching existence of the male gaze in the world of cinema, she specified the projection of the male desire on the female body as the imposition of the fantasies and obsessions of active male desire on “the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning” (Mulvey 15). Women become objects of projected desire in an active and complicated intersection of empowerment and objectification as they are forced to participate in the creation of the optimized ideal image that the male onlooker desires. The enigmatic, Asian and hyper-sexualised Oryx becomes the ideal object of the male gaze in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*. The mere existence of the male gaze and its concentration upon her objectifies her and ironically makes her powerful, as she is consumed by her audience while materializing into an irresistible visual power. The male gaze here can be accessed through the post-colonial lens of debate of the colonial fantasies of exotic “other”. The term “oriental” which was used to describe artistic and literary depictions of “eastern” subjects during the nineteenth century gained an entirely

new meaning after the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978. For Said, orientalism takes perverse shape as a male "power fantasy" that sexualizes a feminized Orient for Western power and possession. He writes "(Orientalism) viewed itself and its subject matter with sexist blinders. This is especially evident in the writing of travellers and novelists: women are usually the creatures of a male power-fantasy. They express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing" (Said 207). This fetish along with the perceived inferiority of the Orient allowed for the white male gaze to paint the Oriental Woman as available to satisfy desires that would normally otherwise be socially and morally unacceptable if acted upon the bodies of white women. The invention of the Oriental Woman also had the power to create a fantasy strong enough to rationalize and justify acts of sexual objectification that are often surrounded by extreme violence. Oriental women were and are fetishized and their sexuality commoditized as exotic, promiscuous and mysterious. The Oriental Woman is a type that relies on particular categories of race, gender, religion, colonial subjectivity as well as other possible personal identity categories, all defined by western standards. One can see how in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, Oryx is easily situated as the object of voyeuristic gazing as a result of the facilitation of the voyeuristic viewing position for western audiences.

Atwood's Oryx is an enigma: a collection of contradictions and tensions of female empowerment and hyper-feminine submission, of liberated sexuality and male oppression, of the one who is gazed at and who looks back. Through the novel, Oryx performs. She performs specifically for the male viewer to fulfill his desire of the submissive and passive female subordinate. At the same time, she performs consciously and deceptively as the sexually willing and always compliant object of desire. The singular instance where Oryx reveals her genuine feelings is a momentary gaze into the camera that is recording her abuse. This gaze is Oryx's display of defiance for the system and people that abuse her daily. To understand this gaze, it is first necessary to understand Oryx's presence in the novel as an inscription of the dystopian nature of hegemonic masculinity. Oryx's homelessness and namelessness make her the perfect site for the fulfillment of violent masculine fantasy, as well as the reiteration of the colonial mentality of possession and the Asian fetish alongside the hyper-capitalist consumption of the objectified female body. Oryx's ethnicity and place of origin are never revealed to the readers or the other characters, or more specifically to the white male Crake and Jimmy. Her own childhood memories and stories are vignettes of poverty stricken villages where mothers must sell their children: strong little boys like her brother and pretty little girls like her, to strange Uncles from the city. These memories of an exotic Asian somewhere in Vietnam, Myanmar or Cambodia are meshed together with Jimmy's own recollections of a pretty young girl-child forced to perform adult deeds for the camera. In the city, Oryx learns of older white men who take a peculiar liking for young girls like her and who secretly lead them to hotel rooms. When she is older, the hotel room becomes a garage in the suburbs in America and then Crake and Jimmy's bed rooms. These men, she

realises, like to play the role of the benefactor, the white man who saves the exotic damsel from poverty and abuse and received her loyalty, submission, beauty and body in return.

Oryx's race and age become the primary reason for her sexual abuse by white travellers to her country and her exploitation in pornographic content targeted specifically at white men. Oryx is expected to behave like the hyper-sexualised yet submissive Asian stereotype that can find its origins in Western imperialism. The male gaze is a sexed gaze that defines a relationship of looking and being looked at in a fetishised manner, where the male voyeuristic tendency inhibits female agency. The first time Oryx is looked at this way, she is just five or six years old selling flowers on the street in her oversized dress, unknowingly attracting the perverted gaze of tall white hairy men who would pay a lot of money to take young girls like her into their hotel rooms. Two or three years later, Oryx would be selected out of a group of children and sold to a man who put pretty little girls in movies. In the movies she was supposed to look "pure-looking" (Atwood 164). This combination of innocent beauty and fetishised body would permanently mark Oryx as a spectacle that is constantly under the voyeuristic gaze and obsessive desire and ownership of numerous men until her death.

The portrayal of Asian women in media, especially pornography and the "Asian fetish" syndrome can be traced to the dominance of the White heterosexual male in the East Asian Wars and the violence incurred by the Asian female body. Sunny Woan links the white man's fetish with Asian women in pornography to early nineteenth-century Western imperialism. The colonization of East Asian nations by Western nations required the deployment of large numbers of troops which consequently led to the growth of the prostitution centres near the areas where troops were stationed. Sexual encounters became the main form of interaction that white men had with Asian women, and they carried these generalizations of the sexually willing Asian back to their countries. The sex-tour industry was then developed to sustain this interest. It follows naturally then that the pornographic industry would include a preponderance of Asian women (Woan 293). Oryx makes her initial disturbing appearance on the computer screen as "just another little girl on a porno site" (Atwood 103). She is simply identified by her features as an East Asian female and is featured on a website that claims to show real sex-tourists engaging in illegal acts with women and children in countries where "kids were plentiful, and where you could buy anything you wanted" (103). In their study conducted in 2002, Jennifer Lynn Gossett and Sarah Byrne discovered that out of thirty-one pornographic websites that depicted the rape or torture of women, more than half showed Asian women as the rape victims and one-third showed white men as the perpetrator (Gosset 694). In the novel, even the white camera-man would also assert his ownership upon the sexualized bodies of the children. Jack "wanted to do movie things with her when there were no movies" (Atwood 165).

Oryx says that being in a movie “was doing what you were told. If they wanted you to smile, you had to smile . . . and you did it because you were afraid not to” (Atwood 163). On that particular day that Crake takes the haunting screen-shot of her face, Oryx smiles as directed. This smile however is hard and forced as she looks over her shoulder directly at the camera. This is the moment that Crake pauses and downloads. Oryx’s image, although suddenly taken from a frozen screen-grab of a continuous scene, is deliberately posed like a studio-photograph. The photograph has been understood as a tool to assert colonial mastery and domination. Karina Eileraas cites how the French mandated the use of identity cards by Algerians during the Algerian revolution as a political tool to formalize the French fantasy of empire by dictating citizenship (Eileraas 813-14). The photograph formulates both the subject and object of representation, maps the identity of the object being photographed and asserts ownership over the object vis-a-vis the image. There is a basic level of violence in the colonial practice of photography as it relinquishes the object’s agency and ability to dictate his/her own representation. Jimmy keeps this picture of Oryx’s searing gaze from the time he is fourteen well into adulthood. To him, this picture functions almost like an identity card that renders Oryx visible to him all the time without the need of her physical presence. The picture becomes a sign of his ownership. This possession becomes so obsessive that when he learns that Crake has been using her photograph as a digital icon on the internet, he is possessed with feelings of extreme jealousy. Crake had stolen his “own private thing: his own guilt, his own shame, his own desire”. “*That’s mine! Give it back!*” he thinks (Atwood 252).

The video and the photograph as a mode of reproduction prompt questions regarding the precise nature and meanings of creation and ownership. It exists as a tangible product of the relationship between the camera, the photographer and the photographed subject. The anxiety of authorship has reflected itself in literary and cultural studies of the mid-twentieth century giving rise to questions regarding the nature of subjectivity, and all other traditional aspects of the governance of the author-consumer relationship, with this anxiety extending to the question of who owns or authors an image. The photograph in its physical form can be said to exist in autonomy while the image is attached to perception, subjectivity and thought. The photograph preserves a moment in space and time, and merely captures the appearance of the object in that moment but the image allows the photograph to remain open to the processes of interpretation. This absence of the author, here the photographer/cameraman, does not transfer ownership automatically to the consumer who has had no creative agency in the production or interpretation of the videos. Jimmy complicates his role as a consumer when he acquires a personal physical copy of Oryx in the form of the photograph. With the author/photographer/cameraman now non-existent, Jimmy asserts his ownership of Oryx, specifically her image and the meanings he attaches to it. Barthes expresses this anxiety of the person being photographed as:

I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an

object: I then experience a micro-vision of death . . . I have become Total Image, which is to say, Death in person; others – the Other – do not dispossess me of myself, they turn me, ferociously, into an object, they put me at their mercy, at their disposal, classified in a file, ready for the subtlest deceptions . . . (Barthes 14).

Oryx thus experiences a kind of death in her permanent fixity as an image as she becomes the bearer or source of meanings that are determined by the male gaze. The particular moment of the photograph is just one in a continuous series of events that is specifically chosen by the 'photographer' for its aesthetic appeal. However the singular image of Oryx confronting the camera is loaded with moments of encounter and a plurality of intersecting gazes. Oryx's gaze is the centre-point of the convergence of multiple troubling moments and voyeuristic tendencies of control, classification and ownership. The image of Oryx looking back at her gazer becomes the setting for aesthetic dimensions, relations of representations and misrepresentations and contestations of ownership and interpretations. The question here is not who owns the photograph, but who owns the image. This positions Oryx as existing in the critical and creative spectrum of the other's gaze.

Laura Mulvey links the concept of "scopophilia" in feminist film theory where she argues that traditional Hollywood movies respond to the deep-seated masculine sexual drive and pleasure involved in looking. Freud's concept of scopophilia or the pleasure in looking is associated with "taking people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze" (Mulvey 17). This constitutes an act of erotic pleasure derived from looking at another person as an object. Oryx evolves from the subject of the image into the object of desire under the power of the one who gazes upon him/her. Her existence is therefore beholden to the gaze and she can either return or avert from it. At the same time, the camera and cameraman transform her trauma into a spectacle for mass consumption, and Crake's decision to freeze the frame permanently locks her trauma and dehumanizes her into an image that can be reproduced, shared and consumed. In its extreme forms, scopophilia can become fixated as a perversion, "producing obsessive voyeurs and Peeping Toms whose only sexual satisfaction can come from watching, in an active controlling sense, the objectifies other" (18). Oryx is immersed in a hermeneutically sealed world that mimics the cinema, where the objects being observed are indifferent to the existence of the audience, thereby allowing for the voyeuristic fantasy to play out. Her gaze disrupts this fantasy, leading the viewer to come to terms with the perverse nature of his pleasure. Her role as an object is twofold: as the source of pleasure for the male character in the 'movie' and as the object gazed at by the heterosexual male spectator. Oryx asserts that women cannot escape the voyeuristic gaze of male fantasies. Her retaliation is to play with the idea of the image-ideal and the distance between he who gazes and she who is the object of the gaze through the façade of performance. She does this particularly by investing agency to the stylized photograph that seeks to freeze her into the ideal-image of Jimmy's voyeuristic gaze.

The conventional close-up of the face is a part of the narrative of eroticism while at the same time momentarily disrupts the verisimilitude of the narrative. Oryx takes advantage of this momentary disruption of the narrative to break the identification the spectator has with the masked male protagonist who is the spectator's surrogate on the screen. By looking straight at the camera, she unmasks her spectator and as the voyeur is caught off guard, she transfers his power to herself. This is important because until that decisive moment, Jimmy, the consumer, had identified the events on the screen as mere entertainment and refused to recognize the real cases of exploitation that built the virtual fantasy world. Oryx's gaze breaks through this stimulation. Oryx disrupts the synchronicity of the performer-camera-cameraman relationship and challenges the convention of women as objects, dissolves the simulation of the instant gratification of consumerist culture and implicates those who gaze at her with her singular, permanent, unending gaze of defiance. In the hyper-consumerist model, the fantasy of instant gratification dictates the creation of the simulated reality of unlimited choices and pleasure. In such a model, it is the media that dictates these consumerist desires that devolve all things into objects. The visuals and objects of pornography are specifically created by the media that makes them available to the ones who desire them and also substantiated by the mainstream objectification of the female body as the object of male desire. In this sense, the visuals and images that allow unrestricted access to the female body and its duties towards male pleasure allow for the ownership of the female body on the screen and the print, reestablishing the visual medium of the camera as a tool to assert domination. Oryx asserts that while women cannot escape the voyeuristic gaze of male fantasies, they can play with the idea of the image-ideal and the distance between he who gazes and she who is the object of the gaze through the façade of performance. She does this particularly by investing agency to the stylized photograph that seeks to freeze her into the ideal-image of Jimmy's voyeuristic gaze.

In the actual moment that Oryx gazes back at the camera, she momentarily reverses the power dynamics of the relationship and violates the viewer in return. The returned female gaze in the moment of the photograph is at complete opposites with the spectacle occurring around her. For a brief moment when the camera shifts from the overall scene to her face, Oryx is no longer framed by male desire. The frame is focused on her face, forcing the viewer to experience the exact moment with her. A natural question arises as to why Oryx's gaze was even noticed by Crake and Jimmy. It was momentary enough to be dismissed and Oryx did not stall in her activities to make too much of a difference on the entire video. The answer is that Oryx's confrontation of the camera and the viewer challenges her established role as a mere object and the compliance expected of her. Her look is not one that is inviting, submissive or dreamy. It is aggressive and challenging, with an almost angry look in her eyes that Jimmy claims burnt him like acid. Her smile is forced and she looks over towards the camera from her original position, almost in an "I can see you" gesture instead of the coy, come hither over-the-shoulder look that is associated with women in sexual scenarios.

In this sense, despite the aesthetic, feminine positioning of her body, her face embodies the masculine traits of assertion and challenge. Her embodiment of what would be described as the masculine in the dichotomous gender system represents her attempt at empowerment through an aggressive stance. This becomes particularly noticeable because Jimmy cannot see through the masquerade of her commercialized hyper-femininity, even in her actual physical form, and therefore notices her sudden foray into the 'masculine'.

Oryx's gaze marks a moment of recognition, as Jimmy is confronted with the reality of his misrepresentation of the 'characters' on the screen. His lack of guilt or moral culpability stemmed from his reasoning that the videos were simply entertainment or beyond his control, thus reducing his participation to a mere viewer. When Oryx looks right into the camera, Jimmy feels personally violated because she is looking "into the secret person inside him. *I see you*, that look said. *I see you watching. I know you. I know what you want.*" (Atwood 104). This accusation makes Jimmy responsible for her abuse when he identifies himself with the masked male character who must avoid public identification. He feels that her gaze is one of contempt, of silent judgment of what he had been viewing online and leaves him with the mixed emotions of guilt and desire. It is at this moment that Jimmy, for the first time, feels morally culpable for the exploitative, sexual videos he regularly consumes. The gaze haunts Jimmy well into his adulthood. Years later his dreams are filled images of the young girls in ribbons and garlands in the videos. "These girls were in danger, in need of rescue. There was something – a threatening presence – . . . perhaps the danger was in him. Perhaps he was the danger" (307). Then they would smile at him, their smiles mimicking the all-knowing, powerful smile of Oryx, smiles that said, "*Oh honey. I know you. I see you. I know what you want.*" (307).

Oryx implicates Jimmy in her sufferings and does not allow him to vindicate himself of his role in her abuse. Jimmy listens as she recalls Jack and his perversions and distances himself from the man who shot the videos that he himself watched.

"Why do you think he is bad?" said Oryx. "He never did anything with me that you don't do. Not nearly so many things!"

"I don't do them against your will", said Jimmy. "Anyway you're grown up now."

Oryx laughed. "Where is my will?" she said (166).

While Jimmy realizes his culpability, he desires to transcend the voyeuristic-scopophilia of the screen to be physically present with Oryx, to rescue her and to own her. Jimmy negotiates his complicated feelings of guilt and desire by separating the sexual identity of Oryx in the video from his scopophilic objectification, and instead identifies her image as her only true representation. In doing so, he transfers his libido to his ego by demanding that the object in the photo solely belongs to him, as opposed to the object in the video that belongs to everyone. In doing so he is able to maintain his fascination with Oryx. Jimmy's attempts to forcibly blend the child and adult Oryx can be explained through

Lacan's concept of *méconnaissance* or misrecognition, a state where the mirror self does not coincide with the physical self, resulting in a relation between image and identity based upon the ego's misrecognition (Lacan 167-68). Jimmy establishes a relation between the image of Oryx and her real-life persona through the "organization of affirmations and negations" (167) to which he is attached in an attempt to 'fix' her. However, her adult-self does not embody the victimhood of the helpless exotic in the picture, and he cannot embody the role of the white colonial master who saves her. Instead he uses his ownership of her mirror self to entitle him to construct her entire childhood according to his narrative of victimhood. This causes him to constantly interrogate her for stories, which he then questions and dissects until he can somehow associate them with his own deflated ego as the failed white saviour.

Along with this post-colonial interpretation, Eileraas explores the concept of misrecognition as "a disavowal of socially sanctioned identity, or a strategic dis-identification" (811). In this sense, misinterpretation is not simply the non-recognition of the image which is declared to be false, but a "strategic dis-identification" where an attempt is made "to provocatively employ fantasy, as an inevitable element of history, memory, and identity, in one's own becoming" (Eileraas 811). Oryx employs the fantasy behind the photograph and its contradictory and discontinuous relationship with the still image to authorize her own narrative of personal history. This places Jimmy in a state of limbo, where he cannot own her physical existence because she has distanced herself from the image that he has established as the point where her narrative begins. When Jimmy presents the photograph to the adult Oryx, she assumes the position of the beholder of the gaze and chooses how she will interpret the picture. She refuses to acknowledge that the girl in the photograph is her. "It has to be!" said Jimmy. "Look! It's your eyes!" "A lot of girls have eyes," she said" (Atwood 105). Jimmy demands that she recognize herself in the picture. He identifies the photograph as real, and the physical Oryx as the misrepresentation of reality. Oryx, on the other hand, plays upon this misrecognition and as such establishes herself as not the represented subject who is frozen by the camera, but as constantly shifting and unable to be properly captured by the fixating lens. This explains how Oryx was able to assert her identity and disarm both the camera and the viewer by dismantling the representation that they both demand of her.

Oryx dismantles this misrepresentation and communicates her resistance while still within the confines of the fantasy world she is confined in. She harnesses the desire of her viewer through the positioning of her body and the sexual setting to generate a momentary disruption where she disarms the voyeurism of her audience. In this process, she momentarily becomes the master of her own image. She is still in the position demanded by the camera but ceases her role as a representative of the viewer's fantasy just long enough to disrupt the determined and desired sequence of events. Oryx accomplishes much more than a disruption when the singular pause becomes permanently existent in the photograph. Oryx returns the other's gaze. She stares directly into the camera in

defiance and hostility, while still maintaining her provocative pose. This disarms the viewer who is unable to process the recognition of the perverse nature of his fantasy when confronted with the complex image of defiance and willingness. She maintains the innocence and naiveté demanded of her role, establishing the distinction between sexual inexperience and sensuality, confessing to the former, but possessing the ability to use the gaze to her advantage. She contests the narrative of dominance and mastery when she makes the 'master' aware of the wretchedness of his deeds and the perversion of his gaze. At this moment she asserts herself as more than another naked body on the screen, but the victim of a culture that preys on female bodies and allows the production and consumption of pedophilic material. She also asserts that she *knows* of the perverted nature of her viewer's desire and disarms them of the comfort of the safety of their secret. Her gaze that gazes back becomes a powerful tool that accuses Jimmy of his complacency and breaks him out of his desensitization towards the graphic violent commodification of bodies.

In this sense, Oryx's returned gaze can break down the simulation of hyper-consumerist dystopian reality. Jimmy's desensitization to graphic violence on the internet stems from the normalization and easy availability of such material for the consumer. Consumerism is built upon the satisfaction of desires, and these same desires are created by the media that influences consumers. This traps consumers in a constant cycle of desire and satisfaction. In a hyper-capitalist consumer industry, desires are generated quickly and satisfied just as quickly. Jimmy is easily drawn into this niche on the internet that functions as a simulation of the violence and fragmentation of the real world without the pretence and moral culpability. This simulation is concerned only with the instant gratification that can be achieved from a multiplicity of unrestricted available choices. It succeeds because the images and objects on the screen cannot be perceived as real and allows the viewer to distance himself/herself from the violence occurring on the screen. The simulation stops functioning for Jimmy when it fails to guarantee its promise of gratification of desires. This dissolution of simulated reality occurs when Oryx disrupts the voyeuristic fantasy world with her gaze, bringing Jimmy to the realization that he is watching real human beings on his screen and that he is in some way culpable for Oryx's sexual exploitation. What was once mere staged entertainment is revealed as reality.

Oryx is juxtaposed against the doll-like figure Jimmy associates with her child-self. This signifies the infantilised female sexuality she is constantly associated with. When Jimmy first sees Oryx she is eight or looks about eight-years-old. She was "small-boned and exquisite, and naked . . . with nothing on her but a garden of flowers and a pink hair ribbon . . . She was on her knees." (Atwood 103). As an adult, she embodies that coveted body from her childhood that Jimmy desperately wanted to possess and leaves him unable to escape the fetishisation for the unavailable body. Jimmy describes the older Oryx as "so delicate. Filigree. . . She had a triangular face – big eyes, a small jaw. . ." (133). This juxtaposition of the doll-like Oryx as a symbol of both sexuality and

childhood is a reflection of the dystopian consumerist culture of objectification of the female body and the male desire for female submission and ownership. Oryx's initial work in the city was as a flower-seller, specifically targeting foreign travelers. She succeeded because she was "so small and fragile, her features so clear and pure. She was given a dress that was too big for her, and in it she looked like an angelic doll" (151). She becomes the object of desire for pedophiles and Uncle En uses this to his advantage by baiting her to such men, catching them in suggestive situations and then blackmailing the culprit in return for his silence. Oryx views all of this as a game, because "it made her feel strong to know that the men thought she was helpless but she was not" (155). Oryx engages in various sexual acts, both on and off camera. She narrates these events to Jimmy with no sense of coercion or abuse. This discombobulated narrative of the adult Oryx of the memories of childhood abuse are narrated through the world-view of her child self and presents her child-self as emptied of ideological childhood innocence in order to assert connections of imposed desires of infantilized female sexuality. She serves as a reflection of the perverted desires of dystopian desires of control and violence, disguised by the utopian trope of childhood innocence.

Jimmy's obsession with Oryx or the representation of Oryx that he has created and owns can be looked upon as representative of the dystopian act of imaging that is fed by a hyper-consumerist culture. Throughout the novel and even after her death her body continues to remain the central axis of her self-image. Her attempts at establishing a positive and liberatory self-image are contradicted by the constant fixation on her appearance, mannerisms and body. Oryx's body continues to remain the focal point for both the feminist attempts to study her embodied experience in relation with the cultural construction of the female body as well as the historical denigration of the female body as the object of desire or as a social good. Oryx discovers at a young age how her heavily desired hyper-sexualized femininity and infantilized sexuality can become tools to subvert traditional gendered dominance and even contest her objectification. The second time Jimmy sees Oryx is as a teenager on the television screen. He is filled with "pure bliss, pure terror" (Atwood 362) at the realization that his one-dimensional image has metamorphosed into a three-dimensional living being. He compares her image on the screen with the photo in his possession and notes that "the look was the same: the same blend of innocence and contempt and understanding." (300). Once again Oryx performs as the male viewer desires. She appears to be "simple, truthful, and sincere" and portrays herself as an unfortunate victim who would have been left to rot in the pornographic industry had her Mister not bought her and brought her to the United States (299). She whole-heartedly performs her role as the submissive, passive Asian who would always remain grateful to the white saviour who rescued her from abuse. Once again, it is her gaze at the camera that betrays her true feelings.

In her adulthood, she encourages this infantilized view of womanhood and the association of the doll with passivity and more importantly, childhood. Oryx evolves her performance to one that is hyper-feminine, and overtly sexual, thus

allowing herself to be objectified by the traditional Eurocentric male gaze. She designs herself as a material, consumerist product by mirroring this gaze and stereotypes herself along hegemonic gender lines. By ironically embodying the qualities of male desire, Oryx defies Jimmy's attempts to form her like a modern-day Pygmalion. Jimmy's failed attempts at constructing her identity through her stories are misogynistic endeavours of the master's dream to build and own his possession. Jimmy's conceives of Oryx in the picture as different from all the other girls and women on the computer screen, as being *better* than other women. Oryx becomes his simulacrum and an almost non-human figure he desperately wants to possess. She understands this when she asks him, "You have a lot of pictures in your head, Jimmy. Where did you get them? Why do you think they are pictures of me?" (132). Jimmy fails at establishing a connection with Oryx, other than the physical because she is not the representation of all that he has modeled upon that singular photograph.

Jimmy wants, and almost demands that Oryx should reciprocate his feelings. Jimmy mirrors and projects his feelings back onto himself because Oryx refuses to acknowledge him as anything more than "for fun" (368). She not only refuses to meet his gaze mutually but inverts traditional gender relations by asserting her non-gaze. Oryx initiates their physical relationship not for the gratification of desires, as encounters initiated by the male gaze usually do. Instead, she infantilises Jimmy and disarms him of any opportunity at owning her. She addresses him as though he is a child. "I didn't want to see you so unhappy Jimmy," was her explanation. "Not about me." (367). She refers to their physical activities as mere play. Jimmy has no control over Oryx's arrivals and departures and is forced to accept that their encounters will occur around her schedule. Jimmy is also required to share her with Crake. While he is resentful, she looks upon her relationship with Crake as mere business and that with Jimmy as mere fun. She also never abandons her façade of the sexually available object of desire and never allows Jimmy to catch another glimpse of the truth he once saw in the photograph. She disassembles the necessity of mutuality Jimmy desires in their relationship by allowing her entire existence to be reduced to objectophilia. In doing so she asserts that there is no reciprocity of feelings, evoking the feelings of Jimmy's initial emotional attachment to the virtual presence on the screen and a frozen image on paper. Jimmy realizes that he cannot own Oryx, because by willingly becoming exactly what the male gaze desires of her, she has denied those who objectify her power to declare they created her. Jimmy cannot decipher which image of Oryx he has frozen in his brain is the real Oryx. He is unsure if he can even connect one image to the next:

*"Enter Oryx as a young girl on a kiddie-porn site, flowers in her hair, whipped cream on her chin; or, enter Oryx as a teenage news item, sprung from a pervert's garage; or, Enter Oryx, stark naked and pedagogical in the Crakers' inner sanctum; or, Enter Oryx, towel around her hair, emerging from the shower; or, Enter Oryx, in a pewter-grey silk pantsuit and demure half-high heels, carrying a briefcase, the image of a*

*professional Compound globewise saleswoman?.... Was there only one Oryx, or was she legion?" (361-62).*

Oryx is conceived by her male spectators a product the determining male gaze that projects its fantasy onto the female body, demanding that she be displayed and looked at. She is meant to spend her entire life as an erotic spectacle which must hold the male gaze and play to the male desire. Oryx moves beyond this orchestration by the male gaze by utilizing her aesthetic commodification to disrupt hierarchical relations. Oryx is not an imitation of the photograph. On the contrary, she embodies the objectification, the vulgarity and the commodification of her child-self which Jimmy wishes she would contradict. In doing so she forbids Jimmy from embarking on the sexist fantasy of escapism of generating a living work of art that only he can possess. Oryx overcomes the colonial master's desire to fix and create her by fixing herself permanently as the object of his original gaze, thus depriving him of the fulfillment of his messiah complex and the desire to fix his own guilty conscience. Oryx destroys the narrative of Jimmy's Pygmalion fantasy that attempts to reduce the traumatic experiences as merely existing to either reiterate or complicate Jimmy's conception of her reality. Instead, she presents readers with a much more potent reality of dystopian Pygmalion-like treatment of the female body that is determined by a hyper-consumerist culture that is characterized by the dominance of the male gaze and is fixated on the gratification of the male desire.

The act of looking back at the spectator is an act of feminist confrontation and empowerment. In doing so, the woman derives her power through the means that sought to disempower her. It is through this process of defiantly gazing while paradoxically performing her sexualized hyper-femininity that Oryx is able to make her spectators emotionally engage in her performance, making them vulnerable to her wants and desires, while imbibing in them the false sense of ownership. She employs the power of the photograph, its contradictory qualities of fixity and multiple interpretations to embody a multiplicity of images in her behaviour and appearance to avoid ownership. Her gaze in the photograph accomplishes the same thing in that it embodies the complexities of the visual as a theatrical performance of fantasy through assimilation and subversion. Oryx's gaze is politically powerful in that it displaces the conventional ways of seeing by lingering in that ambivalent space between resistance and complicity. Silverman suggests, "the look is not truly 'productive' until it effects one final displacement: the displacement of the ego. It does not fully triumph over the forces that constrain it to see in predetermined ways until its appetite for alterity prevails over sameness and self-sameness" (Silverman 183-84). Here, Oryx's gaze creates a sense of self and worth that defies her objectification as she both appropriates and subverts the spectator's gaze. Atwood asserts that if women are looked at, they can look back too. Their looks will be accusatory, disturbing and disdainful looks of feminist defiance, forcing the male spectator to recognize the perversity in his gaze.

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# THE UNCLEAN FEMALE BODY AND THE DISCOURSE OF SANITATION IN THREE CINEMATIC TEXTS

**Sugandha Sehgal**

## Abstract

This paper uses Julia Kristeva's theoretical conceptualization of abjection to critically engage with the depiction of the abject and unclean female body in three contemporary cinematic texts: *Padman* (2018), *Period. End of Sentence* (2018) and *Toilet Ek Prem Katha*(2017). Using a larger critical framework of official WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) discourse and MHM (Menstrual Health Management) literature, the paper argues that the aforementioned films though credited with bringing the issues of menstruation and open defecation into the public sphere remain at best sanitation narratives. All the three films discussed here share an overemphasis on the assumed dirt and lack of cleanliness of the rural female body subject that must be trained and disciplined into proper hygiene habits. As important popular cultural texts, the paper attempts to read these films within a larger theoretical feminist framework of women's abject bodies and the discourse on hygiene. This paper concludes that the female body with its with its disruptive biological functions such as menstruation, child birth and lactation is essentially deemed an abject body that makes it a locus of both official discourse and popular cultural representations.

**Keywords :** Abjection, WASH, dirt, hygiene, menstrual body, sanitation, waste, cleanliness, MHM.

## Of Female Bodies, Abjection and Hygiene: An Introduction

Abjection is sickness at one's own body, at the body beyond the “clean and proper thing...” Abjection is the result of recognizing that the body is more than, in excess of “the clean and the proper. (Elizabeth Grosz, qtd. in Covino17)

The centrality of an essentially unclean female body, a body that is “in excess of the clean and the proper” (Grosz 194) runs common in the three cinematic texts this paper takes up for study. Out of these three, two films, *Padman* (2018) and *Period. End of Sentence* (2018) deal with the menstruating body and locate it in a larger official discourse on menstrual health and hygiene.

The third text *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* (2017) (henceforth TEPK) though not explicitly about the same subject shares a common concern with the hygienic management of the female body. The paper frames the discussion of the aforementioned films within a larger theoretical conceptualization of the abject body, as provided in Julia Kristeva's *Power of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980). Kristeva's formulation of abjection is used to argue that the female body with its unruly biological functions such as menstruation, child birth, lactation etc.<sup>1</sup> and its troublesome fluids is essentially deemed an abject body that makes it a locus of an official discourse on hygiene and sanitation.

Further, it is argued that though these films do important discursive work in bringing out tabooed subjects of rural India such as menstruation and open defecation in the mainstream public sphere but they remain severely limited in their treatment of the female body as a body in hygiene crisis. Also, at best these films remain cast in a sanitized mode of representation carefully avoiding any distasteful references to the corporeal functions of the female body. In all three texts, the crisis of sanitation and hygiene is played out on the abject female body. In the engagement with these aforementioned cinematic narratives, the paper also borrows from the works of Lahiri Dutt (2014) and Caroline Sweetman (2017) to better understand the nuances and gendered complexities of the female body and the larger WASH discourse,<sup>2</sup> constituting the master narrative on women's bodies and hygiene.

The epigraph to the paper points towards the framing of abjection as an involuntary disgust at the body with all its fluids and secretions<sup>3</sup> that threatens to spill over the "clean and proper thing"(ibid).The female body with its menstrual and excremental functions then becomes the epitome of abjection, a body that exceeds the boundaries of "the proper and the clean" (ibid).This section begins by charting out the field of official discourses on gender, women and sanitation as encapsulated in WASH discourse in order to better engage with the subject of the unclean female body in the aforementioned texts. It can be argued that the three films examined in this paper are best described as sanitation narratives in their single-minded preoccupation with the proper and hygienic management of an essentially unclean female body.

There is a need to critically engage with official discourse on the subject of women's bodies and sanitation, as encapsulated in WASH literature in order to better understand the gendered complexities involved in the treatment of the subject of the female body in the same. WASH is defined as "the collective term for water, sanitation and hygiene...due to their interdependent nature, these three core issues are grouped together to represent a growing sector. While each a separate field of work, each is dependent on the presence of the other."(UNICEF WASH)<sup>4</sup>Free access to water, toilets and promotion of good hygiene practices fall under the infrastructural initiatives undertaken under WASH sector. MHM, implying Menstrual Heath and Hygiene is a term originating in the WASH sector. The UNICEF guidelines on MHM (Menstrual Health Management) describe it as "the management of hygiene associated with the menstrual process." (2019)<sup>5</sup>In

both MHM and WASH literature, it is the body of the young female subject that is overemphasized as the locus of discourse on hygiene. There is clearly an implicit recognition of the greater “sanitation needs”<sup>6</sup> of the female body throughout the body of WASH literature.

Caroline Sweetman in her work “Introduction: Gender, Water, Sanitation and Hygiene” focuses on “WASH from the perspective of gender justice and women’s rights”(153). Offering a gendered analysis of the WASH sector, Sweetman draws attention towards the “different sanitation needs of women” (*ibid*). She writes, “menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, menopause all create needs for water and sanitation that are specific to women and these specifically female body functions create hygiene and health problems that can affect women.” (*ibid*) The centrality of women’s bodies in official WASH literature is thus clearly evident.

Sweetman’s observation may be used as a starting point for locating the discussion on the sanitary needs and requirements of the female body that menstruates, gives birth, lactates and defecates. Sanitation and hygiene become even more urgent concerns in the context of the female body and its functions. Of the three texts chosen for analysis here, two deal with the hygienic management of the menstruating body, a body that also becomes a chief developmental priority of the MHM sub sector (menstrual health and hygiene management) of WASH sector, bodies that as Lahiri Dutt argues need “WASH-ing the blood of menstruation”(1) Dutt writes, “women’s use of water differs from men in essentially one aspect: in cleansing the body of menstrual blood” (*ibid*). Does menstruation make the female body perhaps a body more in need of a hygiene discourse than the male body? Kelly Oliver also draws attention towards the relatively cleaner male bodies, as “bodies, that unlike women’s bodies are clean and have proper boundaries”(131). The female body with its menstruating and lactating functions is essentially an open body that does not respect proper boundaries.

The symbolism of water as a cleansing agent in the larger discourse on female hygiene is hard to miss in the third film as well. The narrative of *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* revolves around the rural female subject’s right to hygiene, proper water supply and the privacy of an enclosed bathroom. The defining poster for the film TEPK depicts a cohort of rural women walking down to the open fields with a pitcher of water in their hands called the *lota*. The *lota* can be read as a synecdoche for the unhygienic female rural subject in TEPK. The poster further reads “the *lota* party is coming your way” thereby conflating the defecating bodies of these women with the *lota* party, a loose consortium of rural women who go to the open fields to relieve themselves. A fresh supply of running water and the privacy and dignity of an enclosed bathroom are the basic infrastructural needs of rural women that the film foregrounds.

Pallavi Rao draws attention towards the gendered emphasis of the treatment of the subject of open defecation in rural India, its framing as a female

problem in TEPK (2019) The film casts WASH and its policies and needs as a “question of gender justice and women’s rights” (*ibid*). Also, the film, remains a significant popular cultural text intrinsically tied to the larger nationalist, BJP led agenda of “*Swachch Bharat*” (Clean India)<sup>7</sup> The word “*Swachch*” is a culturally loaded concept implying clean having connotative associations with the word “dirt.” What does the word and concept of “*Swachch*” entail specifically in the context of the rural female body? One wonders why the narrative focus of the film remains exclusively on the rural female body, the site of irresolvable cultural tensions centered on female modesty, honor and shame. Why does the film leave out of frame the male rural body? It is possible to argue that all the three films chosen here become apt case studies for a gendered analysis of an official hygiene discourse centered on the unsanitary bodily practices of the rural female subject.

Another interesting binary common to all three films is that between the rural/ urban female body subjects. It is the “sanitization of the female body of the rural poor” (Dutt 1) that forms the chief concern of both the menstrual narratives, *Padman*(2018)and *Period. End of Sentence* (2018). The urban, relatively cleaner sanitary product using female subject (the character of *Pari* in *Padman*) is set in contrast with the unhygienic body of the rural female subject. Dutt, writing in a different context, in her discussion of the “narrative of hygiene management” warns of the “false notion that all poor women are by definition deficient in hygienic sense.” (2) It is indeed interesting to critically examine how the rural female body is collectively imagined in official WASH discourse as well as portrayed in popular cinematic representations such as these films. In all three films, we either see the rag using unhygienic bleeding body or the *lota* carrying openly defecating body of the rural female subject. The rural/urban divide thus runs deeper than its obvious geo political meanings and affects our understandings of un/hygienic bodies of urban and rural women. The urban body with easy access to commercial menstrual absorbents as well as the luxury of fresh water and the privacy of a bathroom is considered better adept at managing the unclean female body and its troublesome biological functions than its rural counterpart.

It is imperative at this point in the study to briefly examine Kristeva’s conceptualization of abjection before offering critical analysis of the aforementioned films. Kristeva cites “food loathing” as the more “archaic form of abjection” (2). Citing the example of the thin skin that forms on the surface of the milk, which upon touching our lips causes an involuntary “gagging sensation in the stomach.” We immediately withdraw in disgust from any form of abjection such as vomit, pus, decay, infection, the corpse or the skin on the milk. The abject in Kristeva’s formulation is “not lack of cleanliness or health” but that which “disturbs identity, system, order...what does not respect border, positions and rules.”(*ibid*) The abject is disturbing because it confuses the boundaries between inside and outside. Iris Young, citing Kristeva’s argues that “the horror of abjection has two paradigms: the excremental and the menstrual” (109). I find Young’s observation useful in my attempt to read all three cinematic narratives as

attempts to sanitize the abject, excremental and menstrual body of the rural female subject. As an abject body, the female body in Kristeva's formulation is essentially a body that "disrupts boundaries" and "categories"(ibid). Kristeva further writes, "excrement and its equivalents such as decay and infection stand for the danger to identity that comes from without. Menstrual blood, on the contrary, stands for the danger issuing from within the identity"(71). I use Kristeva's twin paradigmatic model of abjection to argue that the female body with its excremental and menstrual waste is an abject body par excellence. It is this abject female body that becomes the center of both official hygiene discourse as well as the narrative locus of the aforementioned films.

### **Three Sanitation Narratives: An Analysis**

This section shall offer a critical analysis of the three films as significant popular cultural interventions in the larger debates on the female body, hygiene and sanitation. *Padman* released on 9<sup>th</sup> February 2018, starring Akshay Kumar, Radhika Apte and Sonam Kapoor in the lead roles is a biopic based on the life of Arunachalam Muruganantham, the man associated with the sanitary napkin revolution in rural India back in the nineties. Muruganantham, a Coimbatore based school dropout is credited with the invention of a low cost sanitary napkin making machine that ensured that cheap and affordable pads reached women in rural India.<sup>8</sup> Directed by R. Balki and co-produced by Twinkle Khanna, a self-professed feminist and columnist, also wife to the Bollywood superstar Kumar, the film casts the story of Muruganantham's success in the mold of an entertainment blockbuster.<sup>9</sup> The plot simply speaking involves the trials and tribulations encountered by Lakshmi Prasad, the protagonist modeled on Muruganantham's character, as he sets out on a quest (much like the shining knight in armor?) to understand the periodic pain and discomfort faced by his wife, the humble Gayatri, played by Radhika Apte. Facing ostracization and social condemnation from family and community alike, Prasad relentlessly pursues his search for cheap and affordable menstrual absorbents for usage by rural women. The urban, sophisticated character of Pari, played by Sonam Kapoor perfect foil to the ignorant rural female subject helps Prasad in his journey. The narrative in its delineation of the padman's heroic journey also offers a powerful sub text challenging menstrual stigma in rural India.

In a nutshell, *Padman* is a story that belongs to the man behind the sanitary napkin making machine. It is Lakshmi Prasad's story, of his personal struggle and his entrepreneurial journey as he goes on to become the renowned padman of the film. I argue that the cinematic focus of the film clearly remains on the padman, the pad making machine and the pad. In fact the title clearly foregrounds the menstrual pad and the padman as the twin heroic protagonists of Balki's film. Interestingly, the posters of the film also foreground the figure of the eponymous padman, showing a larger-than-life figure of Akshay Kumar, dressed in pristine white, standing amidst bulbs of white cotton. I find the visual grammar of the film's posters to be very clinical, as made evident in the

foregrounding of the color white. The posters clearly foreground the cinematic focus of Balki's film on menstrual hygiene practices, thus marking the film within a broader, official MHM frame. (Bobel 6)<sup>10</sup> Also in all the posters we see the menstrual man wearing a benevolent smile on his face. This benevolence is a marker of a newfound form of heroic masculinity, which is best described as a form of "maternal masculinity" (Singh 119). This is the man who will wear an animal bladder and carry animal blood to feel what a menstruating woman feels. All of these acts of a rarely found benevolent and empathetic masculinity cast the padman in the league of the Western superman. Promotional content of the film marketed the idea of padman as India's very own indigenous superman. The tagline of the film, *American has Superman, Batman and Spiderman...but India has Padman* immediately casts it a heroic narrative centered on the figure of the unique s/ hero, Lakshmi Prasad.

The women all this while lurk on the margins of the narrative. While Gayatri, the wife is cast in the stereotype of the ignorant rural female subject, one who is complicit in her oppression, Pari, the modern urban female subject exists to add unnecessary romantic melodrama to the film. As a mainstream feature film dealing with the tabooed subject of menstruation in rural India, *Padman* remains very careful in its delineation of the subject, and tries at best to remain a sanitized intervention in the larger debates. Early responses to the film focused on its watchability as a family film. The film was marketed in away so as to make it least embarrassing as a watching experience for the average middle class Indian viewer despite its difficult subject. The celebratory euphoria surrounding the release of the film was hard to miss as it was marketed as the much-needed movement that would solve the problem of period poverty in rural India. Furthermore, the #padman challenge on social media involving Bollywood celebrities sharing photographs holding a sanitary napkin also created ripples as it sparked debates on the efficacy of the same as a mere publicity gimmick or a revolutionary movement for greater social change.<sup>11</sup> Though the film did important discursive work in bringing menstrual conversations into the mainstream, it did suffer from serious contradictions in its treatment of the subject.

I argue that despite its celebratory feminist rhetoric, *Padman* remained at best a sanitation narrative on the menstruating body. Firstly, the film valorized the male protagonist often at the cost of an erasure of female voice and agency in the narrative. Borrowing from Chris Bobel's critique of official MHM discourse drawing attention towards the problem with what she describes as the "rescue paradigm" (2019, 32) the same conceptualization may be used to describe *Padman* as a rescue narrative that "directs attention away from the women and instead spotlights the helper."(ibid) Though the masses loved the film for its clean and sanitized treatment of India's period problem, critics and feminists were quick to see through the false feminist politics of a film like *Padman*. The film remained at best an uncritical, populist valorization of an unconventional heroic masculinity. It also showcased the sanitary pad-making machine/ man as

the ultimate savior that rural women in India need. The machine then becomes a co protagonist sharing the limelight with the hero. In fact, the man becomes the machine and the machine becomes the man.

Furthermore, in the film, it is the sanitary pad that is cast as the ultimate rescue that the unhygienic menstruating body of the rural subject needs. Sinu Joseph in her article “Why India Does not need a sanitary napkin revolution” (2015) draws attention towards our inherent bias towards the “sand-husk-ash-using rural women.” Writing on “menstrual products and rural women”, Joseph’s observation on the “need to raise the standard of conversations around menstruation beyond pads” rings true in the case of both the menstrual narratives discussed here (*ibid*)<sup>12</sup>. Both the commercial blockbuster and the documentary posit the commercial sanitary napkin as the revolution that rural women need. With the latest fad of sustainable menstrual products such as tampons, cups and cloth reusables, one wonders why the commercial sanitary napkin is so aggressively championed as the ultimate hygiene technology that the bleeding rural female body needs. Though the film remained problematic on so many grounds, it is still credited still with bringing menstrual conversations into mainstream visual culture, no matter how sanitized and censored the discourse was. The film remained at best what critics called “a public service announcement”<sup>13</sup> type of narrative that treated India’s menstrual problem within the overarching framework of gender, development and women’s health. The film resembled an official governmental educational film on sanitary pads but remolded and recast as a mass entertainer with the right dosage of melodrama and romance. I borrow Bobel’s description of an “MHM film” (178) to perhaps best describe the activist potential, if at all any of a Bollywood blockbuster like *Padman*.

*Period .End of Sentence* which is a short documentary directed by Rayka Zehtabchi, produced by Sikhya Entertainment was released on Netflix in India on 5<sup>th</sup> April 2018. The short 26 minutes documentary charts the journey of a small group of rural women living in Hapur, away from the metropolitan heart of Delhi as they take to a new sanitary pad making machine as the road to menstrual hygiene as well as economic empowerment. It is interesting to note that the film was born out of a creative partnership between a group of young students at the Oakwood School, Los Angeles as part of their “Pad Project”, Action India and the director Zehtabchi.<sup>14</sup> The money raised by the girls of Oakwood School through bake sales was used to purchase Arunachalam Muruganantham’s cheap sanitary pad making machine and sent to the girls of Hapur. “Ek machine lag rahi hai Kathikera mein”, (there is a machine being sent to your village”) says the voiceover as Muruganantham’s machine is installed in the village. The machine brings the much-needed menstrual revolution in the village as it allows rural women to switch to better, more hygienic menstrual practices as well as empower them through job opportunities. The pads produced are metaphorically called “Fly”, poetically embodying rural women’s dreams and aspirations to rise and shine. In this documentary narrative following the story of a sanitary pad-making

machine, the filmmakers also bring to light the deeper socio-cultural tensions, taboos and superstitions surrounding menstruation in rural India.

The noble efforts of this Westerner's story about the menstruating body of the non-Western "Other" were duly recognized and awarded at the Oscars as the film won the Best Short Documentary award. Though the discursive and ideological work done by the documentary deserves acclaim, I argue that there are some serious problems with it. I attempt to offer an informed critique of the documentary using Chris Bobel's work on "The Spectacle of the Third World and the Politics of Rescue." (2019) I borrow Bobel's use of the term "spectacularization" to argue that *Period End of Sentence* turns the grinning, rural Indian subject into a spectacle that is consumed by the West. Citing Debord (1968), Bobel quotes, "the spectacle is not a collection of images. Rather it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by the image"(171).

The manner in which Zahtabchi's documentary spectacularizes the rural Indian subject speaks volumes about the power dynamics between an ignorant South steeped in archaic and unsanitary menstrual practices and an enlightened global North standing for Western modernity. The entire documentary is cast in the frame of "a rescue narrative" (Bobel 199) where the machine(bought by the money raised by noble Westerners) brings the much-needed menstrual revolution in backward, unhygienic poor India. The Westerners are depicted as "saviors of brown girls in the Global South" as they solve the "problem of backward menstrual care" in rural India using the right technology and the right product(ibid). I argue that both *Padman* and *Period. End of Sentence* share an overemphasis on the savior trope often at the cost of an erasure of the female menstruating subject. In the former, it is the unique figure of the padman and in the latter the benevolent Westerner cast in the trope of the rescuer that enjoys the cinematic focus.

Furthermore, the portrayal of young, rural women in India remains problematic in the documentary as they are rendered as mute subjects, humble receivers of Western philanthropic menstrual modernity. One is surprised by the number of cinematic shots in Zahtabchi's documentary that simply depict young girls giggling before the camera or as Bobel rightly argues "grinning for the camera" (178). Their responses to the documentary makers questions such as what is a period or have [you] heard about the pad are at best muffled, inarticulate responses structured by shame and silence. The gaze of the Western documentary makers freezes these young rural women in the stereotype of the backward and ignorant third world girl who must be rescued by the enlightened filmmakers/ padmakers of the West. I find the treatment of the subject condescending as the documentary frames the problem of menstrual management as a third world issue.

The film is also marked by a conspicuous absence of the female voice as the young rural girls featured remain at best a demographic profile, the ignorant, unhygienic rural subject at the receiving end of Western modernity equated with

the right menstrual hygiene products. Much like *Padman*, I find the overemphasis on “the -pad -as -the -solution narrative” problematic. Lahiri Dutt observes that “a medical discourse of cleanliness delegitimizes the use of traditional, alternative means of managing menstruation” and posits the sanitary pad as the “only means of living clean and hygienic lives” (5). I conclude that the documentary, much like the mainstream feature film discussed before portrays the menstruating body of the rural female subject as an unsanitary and unhygienic body that must be disciplined and trained into proper habits of hygiene.

The third cinematic text discussed in this paper TEPK does not deal with the subject of the menstrual body but shares a common concern with the representational politics of the female body with the previously discussed films. In a nutshell, TEPK is a story about a provincial man whose wife leaves him because there is no toilet in the house and returns for a romantic reunion only after the hero has built one in the courtyard of his father’s brahmanical house. This is a unique love story (prem katha) structured on the premise of a toilet in the house. As a mainstream commercial film starring Akshay Kumar and Bhumi Pednekar, TEPK was an instant success at the office. Directed by Narayan Singh, the film was released on 11<sup>th</sup> August 2017 (four days before Independence day) with an interesting tagline “Swachch Azadi” (Clean Independence). The ideological affiliation of the film with the larger, nationalist, BJP led agenda of “Swacch Bharat Abhiyaan” is hard to miss. The film was lauded for its efforts to initiate dialogue on the problem of open defecation in rural India.

Pallavi Rao observes that the film “framed the issue of open defecation significantly through its focus on gender” (83). She further adds that the film “framed the issue as a critical issue for women’s rights” (83). One wonders why a film on the social issue of the health perils of open defecation should exclusively focus on the female body with a total exclusion of the male body. The film right from its opening shot depicting a group of women walking down the open fields with lotas in their hands is single mindedly focused on the hygiene politics of the female body. The opening shot is framed as a “lota party” sequence showing rural women cracking jokes and laughing as they walk down the fields to defecate in the open. Early morning daybreak, the lotas, the uplifted sarees and the open fields constitute the cinematic focus of this shot. The revolution begins with one woman, the protagonist of the film played by Bhumi Pednekar who refuses to compromise her dignity by defecating in the open. The plot revolves around her revolt, aided by her modern and progressive Brahmanical husband who fights against tradition to construct a toilet in the same courtyard that houses the holy tulsi plant. Overall, it seems to be a well-intentioned film with a clear propagandist message against the perils of open defecation in rural India.

However, a closer critical analysis reveals that much like *Padman* and *Period. End of Sentence*, TEPK is also centered excessively on the site of the female body as a locus of hygiene and sanitation. Why are we only talking about the body of the rural female subject in this larger nationalist gung-ho about

cleanliness and “swachchta” (cleanliness)? The unhygienic practices of the *lota* carrying female rural body become the focus of the film’s narrative, all this while leaving out of frame the bodily practices of the male rural subject. By framing the issue as a gendered phenomenon, the focus clearly shifts from the corporeality of the act of open defecation to the threat posed by the abject female body to social and symbolic order. I conclude this discussion with Dutt’s observation on the “differing water and sanitation needs of women” (2) in the context of the film. Does the body of the female rural subject defecating in the open pose a greater threat to social and health order because it is both an excremental and a menstrual body? (Kristeva71). Does this make the female body doubly abject, and hence more in need of proper hygiene, something that a pitcher full of water (the *lota*) cannot take care of?

This paper has attempted to offer a critical reading of three recent cinematic texts as sanitation narratives that remain excessively concerned about the proper management of the unclean female body. Using the three texts as case studies, this paper places the discussion within a larger theoretical feminist framework of women’s abject bodies and the discourse on hygiene. One wonders if the female body is more in need of a discourse on hygiene because as Elizabeth Grosz argues “women are somehow more corporeal, more biological and more natural than men?” (14). Popular cultural conceptualizations of female embodiment as found in the aforementioned cinematic narratives compel the reader to rethink the compulsory logic of women’s association with a troublesome corporeality.

#### **Notes :**

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- <sup>1</sup> Sweetman, Caroline and Louise Medland in “Introduction: Gender, Water, Sanitation and Hygiene” (2017) draw attention towards the “specifically female bodily functions that create health and hygiene problems.” (p. 154)
  - <sup>2</sup> WASH is an acronym standing for Water, Sanitation and Hygiene, an official sector catering to the infrastructural needs for water, toilets and proper hygiene habits. This is also discussed in greater detail later in the paper.
  - <sup>3</sup> For more on the troublesome fluids of the female body such as menstrual blood and/or breast milk, see Elizabeth Grosz’ discussion on “Powers and Dangers: Body Fluids” (p.192) in *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism*. (1994)
  - <sup>4</sup> I borrow the official definition from the UNICEF webpage. For more see, [“https://www.unicef.org/wash/3942\\_3952.htm](https://www.unicef.org/wash/3942_3952.htm)
  - <sup>5</sup> For more on menstrual health and hygiene, see *Guidance on Menstrual Health and Hygiene*. UNICEF, March 2019, First Edition, Programme Division/WASH.
  - <sup>6</sup> I borrow the phrase “sanitation needs” from Sweetman. (2017)
  - <sup>7</sup> Swaccha Bharat Mission or the Clean India Mission was a countrywide campaign initiated by the Government of India in 2014 to eliminate open defecation and improve solid waste management. See <https://swachhbharatmission.gov.in/sbmcms/index.htm>

- <sup>8</sup> For more on Muruganantham's story, see <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-26260978> and <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/blchangemakers/period-story-how-padman-muruganantham-arunachalam-scripted-a-hygiene-revolution/article31020852.ece>
- <sup>9</sup> Interestingly, Twinkle Khanna's book *The Legend of Lakshmi Prasad* (2016) also contains a short story on the padman fable titled "The Sanitary Man of Sacred Land." The film *Padman* is based out of this story.
- <sup>10</sup> Chris Bobel in her recent work offers an informed critique of the official MHM framework. (2019) Writing on Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM), Bobel argues that originating from the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) developmental sector, MHM animates a number of NGOs and social enterprises focused on providing menstrual care products, water and hygiene related infrastructure. (2019, 6)
- <sup>11</sup> For more on the challenge, see <https://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/bollywood/padman-challenge-deepika-padukone-arjun-kapoor-ayushmann-khurrana-pose-with-a-sanitary-pad-5050762/>
- <sup>12</sup> Josehp's blog can be accessed here : <https://swarajyamag.com/culture/why-india-doesnt-need-the-sanitary-napkin-revolution/>
- <sup>13</sup> I borrow the phrase from <https://www.filmcompanion.in/reviews/bollywood-review/pad-man-movie-review-red-alert>. For more on the Pad Project, see <https://charactersonthecouch.com/film/period-end-of-sentence-helps-girls-rise-and-fly-out-of-shame/>.

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## **THE CITY OF COLOMBO IN CARL MULLER'S COLOMBO AND SHYAM SELVADURAI'S THE HUNGRY GHOSTS**

**Esther Daimari**

### **Abstract**

This paper analyzes the representation of the city (in other words, the urban landscape) of Colombo in the fiction of two Sri Lankan writers in English – Carl Muller's *Colombo* (1995) and Shyam Selvadurai's *The Hungry Ghosts* (2013). It examines how the texts demystify the city of Colombo by focusing on the non-spectacular landscapes of Colombo and thereby effectively break the romantic and picturesque lens through which Sri Lanka is otherwise seen. It further explores how the topoi of monuments, slums and streets of Colombo are deployed in the novels as potent symbols of degeneration and corruption in an aspiring postcolonial city. The argument of the paper will be based on the theoretical concepts of the "dialectical image" and "phantasmagoria". The authors, as the article argues, scrutinize the transformation of Colombo after Sri Lanka's independence in 1948 into a degrading cityscape and a place of fluctuating and rapid social and political change and a place of continuous conflict.

**Keywords :** postcolonial urbanscapes, city, South Asian literature, Sri Lankan English literature, Colombo

This paper analyzes the representation of the city (in other words, the urban landscape) of Colombo in the fiction of two Sri Lankan writers in English – Carl Muller's *Colombo* (1995) and Shyam Selvadurai's *The Hungry Ghosts* (2013). It examines how the texts demystify the city of Colombo by focusing on the non-spectacular landscapes of Colombo and thereby effectively break the romantic and picturesque lens through which Sri Lanka is otherwise seen. It further explores how the topoi of monuments, slums and streets of Colombo are deployed in the novels as potent symbols of degeneration and corruption in an aspiring postcolonial city. The argument of the paper will be based on the theoretical concepts of the "dialectical image" and "phantasmagoria". The authors, as the article argues, scrutinize the transformation of Colombo after Sri Lanka's independence in 1948 into a degrading cityscape and a place of fluctuating and rapid social and political change and a place of continuous conflict.

The notion of the city or the urban space have become immensely important for postcolonial writers in exploring key questions of home, exile,

alienation, being, migration, culture and identity. Diasporic writers like Shyam Selvadurai often display a tussle between two or more places/cities; most often it is the author's or one of the character's birth city and the city of exile, the place where the character moves to voluntarily or involuntarily. As the character subconsciously compares the two places, it allows the writer to use city as strategic topoi to comment on the modernizing and "development" programmes of the post-independence nation. It also brings into play notions of utopia and dystopia as well as the binary of the rural and the urban in the post-colonial context.

In texts such as Muller's *Colombo* and Selvadurai's *The Hungry Ghost*, the city is the space for major temporal and spatial sequences and the center of the dramatic action. The city brings together both colonial and postcolonial discourses in the novel. Paulo Brusasco, in his analysis of the novel *Colombo*, says that Colombo itself is the main character in the novel. Other than Colombo and the narrator, there are no recurring characters in the novel. There is also no unifying plot in the novel. There are 27 self-contained chapters which follow no specific pattern and the novel exhibits an elaborate use of bricolage, intertextuality, official chronicles personal memoirs, news items, fictional passages, social criticism, and so on. The narration constantly shifts in time and space and as Brusasco says, in the narrative "space and time interact, the one prompting glimpses of the other"(176). Every time the narrator chronicles the past and present history of an area in Colombo, he supports his claims by including a fictional episode that illustrates the darker side of Colombo. Selvadurai's *The Hungry Ghosts* take us through various cities, mainly Vancouver, Toronto and Colombo. The novel can be read as Selvadurai's attempt to chart the landscape of both Canada and Sri Lanka. The bi-racial (half-Sinhala and half-Tamil) protagonist of the novel Shivan Rassiah, moves from Colombo to Toronto in order to escape war as well as the dominance of his grandmother, Aacho. Throughout the novel, the protagonist travels back and forth from Sri Lanka and Canada in an attempt to come to terms with the ghosts of his past and in the process, Selvadurai reveals various aspects of city life in both Canada and Sri Lanka. After *Funny Boy* and *Cinnamon Gardens*, both of which are set in Colombo, Selvadurai along with capturing the abundant culture and landscape of Colombo also turns his interest into exploring the bleak working-class Canadian suburb where his family reached after escaping from Sri Lanka in 1983. The novels invite the reader to reexamine the past and the present landscape of the city, thereby shedding light on some of the seen, yet ignored aspects of the city in the narrative of an "advanced" metropolis that highlights what Guy Debord calls the "spectacles", the grand and decorative images that signify progress in a modern capitalist city.

One of the primary contentions that evolve from a close reading of texts like *Colombo* and *The Hungry Ghosts* is that the city is not a historical but a product of a long history of colonialism, postcolonialism, capitalist commodification of landscape and the civil war. Muller in *Colombo* and other texts like his Burgher trilogy<sup>1</sup> explores the Anglicization of the Sri Lanka

landscape by the British as they imported Britain's own landscape into Ceylon. He comments on the transformative impact of the Empire that planted colonial houses, buildings and railways among other things during the colonial period and shows how in the post-colonial period, landscape/landscaping in turn became a way to project difference, nationalism and identity. In representing these, the appearance of the city becomes the focal point. It is "the most readable landmark of the city" (Jing Li 3) – the most decipherable and perceptible structures that can speak volumes about the place. The narrator's choice of landmarks is symbolic as they help him dissect the city as an "artificial city" (Muller 413) marked by a very strong presence of foreigners – the Arab traders, the Moors, the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British – in the past.

Muller displays a sense of angst due to the rapid deterioration of the city and moan the loss of a greener and more pristine condition of Colombo of the past. Drawing the reader's attention to some of the prime areas in Colombo like the Galle Face Green, The Fort, Pettah, etc. in the stories, Muller looks at Colombo as a ruin which is in large part already destroyed as the city became a perfect canvas for the colonialists to come and project their power and fantasies on it. However, Muller also attributes a sense of volatility to the city as its spaces emerge as hybrid and ambivalent. After the British left the island, the city became a site for creating a new image of the nation, a site for experimenting with different programs of reform and development. Nihal Perera highlights the grand reorganization of the city after independence mostly by dismantling older structures and replacing them with new indigenous structures. Tariq Jazeel highlights that the architects of Sri Lanka tried to "fashion an avowedly 'post-colonial' architecture of sorts" (Jazeel 6) in order to bring in a new sense of national citizenship and collective consciousness and an alternative modernity that did not rely on the Western tradition of development. There was a generous sprouting of modernist buildings and complexes over pre-existing ones, some were only renovated and some other colonial structures stayed on as reminders of colonialism. The resultant landscape was a "mixed urban landscape" that facilitated an odd and unusual kind of urban experience, which is different, as explored in Shyam Selvadurai's *The Hungry Ghost*, from the city experience in the West. In the post-colonial period, Colombo and its limited space, according to Muller and Selvadurai, is constantly negotiated by the rich and the poor, the privileged and the underprivileged, the displaced and the marginalized. The writers look at the city from the point of view of the marginalized (Muller's characters are mostly poor and the underprivileged and Selvadurai's protagonist is a homosexual) and highlight how their aspirations and dreams are constantly muffled in a city struggling with its own dream of becoming a world-class city. The novels subvert the cliché of a progressive metropolis by presenting an alternative mode of urban writing by highlighting the ugly and the non-spectacular, the "what-has-been" and the "now" in what Walter Benjamin calls the "lightning flash' of dialectic image(s)" (Pensky 178). As Pensky suggests, the concept of the "dialectical image" is the "methodological heart" of Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*. Walter Benjamin in his *Arcades Project* defined "the

dialectical image" as "an image that emerges suddenly in a flash. What has been is to be held fast – as an image flashing up in the now of its recognizability" (7). Interpreting the idea, Pensky explains that in Benjamin's sense, the "‘past’ and ‘present’ are constantly locked in a complex interplay in which what is past and what is present are negotiated through material struggles" (180). Walter Benjamin believed in showing history over telling history through graphic and concrete images and he realized that "the images cannot be strung together into a coherent, non-contradictory picture of the whole" (Buck-Morss 55) but that the images can be presented only in fragments and thereby create a montage of a constellation of images. Both Muller and Selvadurai present a montage of images of monuments, slums and streets of Colombo that are "dialectical" in the sense that these images not only represent the "now time" but are also relics and "hieroglyphic clues to a forgotten past" (Buck-Morss 39). The trace of past history seem to survive in fossilized form in the hybrid and ambivalent spaces like the built structures and streets of the city. As examples, we may cite Muller's depiction of the Central Business District, the colonial Fort area, the President's House, Old Parliament Building/ Presidential Secretariat, The Town Hall and The Royal College of Colombo, that in Muller's imagination and perhaps in the collective imagination of other Burghers like him, are remnants of the colonial period that still "remind us (them) of the balmy days that were" (Muller 446). In deep contrast to the past situation, both Muller and Selvadurai suggests that in the present period, these spaces have metamorphosed into dens and hubs of crimes, illegal activities, violence and poverty and all sorts of dirt and squalor surround them.

Selvadurai further highlights that the British not only left imprints of their architecture and political and financial system in the island but also left residues of western manners for the natives to mimic. In post-colonial Sri Lankan culture, class difference and "western avarice" seemed to have replaced Buddhist tolerance and communalism and ethnic clashes have seeped into the social and political fabric of the nation. In *The Hungry Ghosts*, Shivan's grandmother (Aacho) is an embodiment of "avarice". An owner of a number of properties in various parts of Colombo, it was only money and profit that motivated her. The colonialist's drive to conquer and amass new lands and wealth can be equated with the post-colonial subject's (like Aacho's) ambition to be richer in the post-colonial era. Anoma Pieris says that the class system is "the most resilient social inheritance from the colonial period in South Asia" (4) that "produced a hierarchy based on economic capital and monetization of the social system around capitalist morality and exercised through colonial laws" (4). This inheritance divided the population into "nobodys" and "somebodys" in the post-colonial period. Aacho, a native dipped in western manners and "western avarice", ironically shows a good understanding of Buddhist philosophy, revealing the dialectical nature of the character. The Buddhist moral tales narrated by his grandmother shapes a good part of Shivan's childhood. The most memorable story Shivan heard from Aacho was that of the *perehaya*: a *perehaya* looks like a "hungry ghost, with stork-like limbs and an enormous

belly that he must prop up with his hands. The yellowed flesh of his face is seared to the skull, his mouth no larger than the eye of a needle, so he can never satisfy his hunger" (Selvadurai 24). According to this myth, "a person is reborn a *perethaya*, because, during the human life, he desired too much – hence the large stomach that can never be filled through the tiny mouth" (Selvadurai 24). The moral of the story is that one should refrain from too much greed that ironically, Aacho herself could not overcome. Capitalists like Aacho used criminals like Chandralal to bully and exploit people. On the other hand, Selvadurai also introduces characters like Siriyani Karunaratne, Mili, and Ranjini who are human activists and work for organisations like "Kantha" to represent the interests of the poor and the marginalized. The city, thus, is represented as a dialectical site of conflicting groups and ideologies.

### **Colombo : Not a Dream Space**

Traditionally, as stark contrast to the rural space that stands for simplicity, antiquity and tradition, the urban space promises a different kind of experience; for many it is a dream space where one can realize personal desires and project communal hopes. Colombo's aspiration to be a successful cosmopolitan city, Muller presents, is obvious from the city's engagement with modernity inherited from its previous conquerors, its rapid urbanization, industrialization, grandiose display of skyscrapers and buildings, and use of technology. However, both Muller and Selvadurai draw attention to the dystopian underbelly of Colombo apparent from the writer's examination of what Walter Benjamin and George Simmel suggests as "urban phantasmagoria" through engaging episodes of marginalized characters' tryst with poverty, crime, fear, discrimination, oppression and exclusion that take place within those spaces. The writers highlight that Colombo, in its various capacities, stand as a metaphor for an urban disaster, as an example of a city where "modernity has gone astray".<sup>2</sup>

The idea of the "phantasmagoria" "goes back three centuries to the use of magic lantern for projecting phantasmatic-hallucinatory images" (Andreotti and Lahiji 15). The term, then, captures the city as a "spectacular incarnation" of the urban space "with all its excesses and excrescencies" (Andreotti and Lahiji X). Phantasmagoria encapsulates the spectacular dream houses and "prestige objects" of the city created with a sense of vanity, narcissism and arrogance that bears the capacity to render the citizens of the city invisible. In the neoliberal context, the fetishized commodity hijacks the pride of place of the human and there is a growing sense of alienation, displacement and exclusion of the person from the spaces and structures of the city. Alternatively, in Muller's and Selvadurai's urban writing, the phantasmagoria promotes the hyper visibility of the host of "outcasts", the forgotten, the poor and the oppressed who are otherwise not taken into account by the government or the city planners; they make their presence felt through their stark contrast to the spectacular surroundings. In fact, in their writings, the uncanny presence of the multitude of outcasts themselves seems to take on a phantasmagoric shape. This is mostly

evident as Muller uses the trope of the slum and the street in describing Colombo. He talks about beggars begging in the streets of Colombo in the chapter "The Exhibitionist". The surrealistic and phantasmagoric quality of the beggars in the city of Colombo is highlighted as Muller describes the sudden disappearance of these figures at dusk and their magical reappearance on the streets of the city during daytime. He poses a question,

Who brings that unshaven, toothless epileptic to the streets? He cannot walk.  
He drags shaky legs on the cobbles to retrieve a coin that has rolled out of  
reach. Yet, by dawn, night workers find him, ready to wail through another  
day.

And by nightfall, who takes him away? And where does he go? (Muller 47)

Muller puts slums at the center while narrating about Colombo. Scholars of South Asian cities such as Mike Davis look at the city as dumping grounds of "surplus humanity"— "people cut out of the formal world economy" (Davis 14) and "slum remains the only fully franchised solution to the problem of warehousing the 21<sup>st</sup> century surplus humanity" (Davis 28). Both Muller and Selvadurai, through the use of the trope of the slum represent Colombo as a city that thrives on stratification and segregation of the rich from the poor, and of the powerful from the marginalized. As population began to grow in Colombo, the city elite moved out to occupy the more spacious residential area in the suburbs and the central part of Colombo came to be occupied by the "other"—the poor, the minorities, the refugees, the (im) migrants, the outcasts. Cut off from basic amenities and opportunities, the slum dwellers become prone to crimes, illegal activities and poverty. Muller, through his montage of the everyday lives of the people brings forth shocking account of people living in slums. "Under the Umbrella" is an account of two lovers, Anton and Kusum, for whom, the only private space available for making love in the city is provided by Anton's umbrella. Ironically, in the secret spaces of one of the cheap hotels, a young Malay girl is secretly murdered and another teenager raped with "her vagina ripped apart" (Muller 8). "The Canalians" reveals the life of city migrants who are forced to live by the banks of the Old Dutch canal. Joronis and his family live a disgusting life in one of the shacks. Joronis plucks coconuts during daytime and steals at night. His children are also involved in various illegal activities— "Romiel, picks pockets in the Pettah. Agnes is a whore and Sandu, yet small, is a squirrel of a boy who will steal anything" (Muller 65). "The Exhibitionists" tells the story of a beggar woman in Colombo who begs to earn a living but her drunkard husband takes away all the money that she earns, for buying alcohol. Selvadurai also in *The Hungry Ghosts* highlights how gentrification and class divide characterizes Colombo. Shivan's grandmother possesses various rental properties at different parts of Colombo. She lets out for rent the big house in the wealthy area of Colombo 7 to an American couple, whereas, her shabby and pitiable house in Pettah is occupied by a poor family. Young Shivan notices that her grandmother is courteous to the rich tenants of her Cinnamon Garden house but harsh and sarcastic to her tenants of the Pettah property, thereby educating her young

grandson about the urban society of Sri Lanka that is comprised of the civil society of the rich and the poor, that occupy the dirtier and less desirable spaces of the city. The later are a prototype of a class that Muller calls “the shabby people.” “The shabby people” does a small job somewhere and works hard to make ends meet. He is an embodiment of poverty as the want of money – for buying necessary items, for paying church tithes and fees, etc. – constantly bothers him. They are the vote banks for politicians and the bargain seekers in the world of commodities as they lose themselves in “a wilderness of display, a wilderness of world’s worst rubbish” (Muller 27). They travel in buses, live in homes with a leaking roof and buy from open pavement stalls with “this insane urge to buy an ugly bauble, even a plastic flower which, they hope, will brighten their shabby homes” (Muller 27).

Muller further highlights the slums in Colombo as a site of juvenile delinquency and youth crime. *Colombo* highlights the abundance of sex crime and abuse in the slum areas. Brusasco comments that Muller’s “treatment of sexuality takes a different color in Colombo, where it is portrayed as dark, traumatic and often relying on a net of illicit family or social connivance so as to stress its most despicable and poisonous aspects” (183). Muller creates vivid images of children turning themselves into prostitutes, thieves, drug addicts, actors in porn, and so on. Muller’s dictum “these slum children have a sharp native intelligence … they know on which side their bread is buttered” (Muller 148) sums up the life and character of the slum children. Walter Benjamin says the figure of the prostitute is an allegory of the (human) commodity and its status as exchange-value object in the urban phantasmagoria. Sex in the city turns into a fetish and the prostitute/poor child, an object that offer herself/himself as a substitute for financial return. The slum children begin to look at sex as a commodity that can be exchanged for something valuable; as a physical activity (labour) remote from emotion that makes them vulnerable to crimes like prostitution and rape. Andreotti and Lahiji comments that “the dialectic in the general structure of fetishism determines the relation between the thing itself and its substitute in such a way that this substitute behind which the thing itself lies hidden, ultimately disappears in favor of the thing itself” (26). In the world of tourism, where Sri Lanka, Colombo in particular, is projected as the ideal haven for pleasure-seeking tourists, the subjection of the body to exploitation is hardly noticed over the commodity of sex that these (little) bodies provide. Muller dramatizes sexual encounters between tourists and the local people, especially children. Jody Miller in his study on homosexuality in Sri Lanka highlights that the “Europeans were generally fascinated; in both an ethnographic and prurient fashion by sexual practices overseas” (7). They expect that the non-western people are born with “abnormal sexual endowments” (Miller 7) and can provide them with “kinky refinements of sexual pleasure” (Miller 7). In Muller’s *Colombo*, in the chapter “Oh, Oh, Colombo”, Siya works as a pimp whose job is to provide a good sexual experience to foreigners. He offers his clients children who, he knows, are easy to procure. Sila offers his own daughter, Nila, to sexually please the “suddas”/ foreigners. Nila, although she does not like the experience

with the “suddas”, it is gratifying to the little child to be able to buy a “packet of sugar for her father” and “a small tin of powdered milk” (Muller 305). Such sexual relationships are not difficult to form in the city with an ever-growing appetite for excitement and thrill, with poverty on one side, and money and power on the other. Although prostitution is a taboo and homosexuality a crime in Sri Lanka, such activities go unabated in the city.

These stories lend a “phantasmagoric” element to Muller’s urban writing as they are meant to create enough stimuli for the readers so as to “shock”<sup>3</sup> them out of their senses, in the same way as intoxication or drug addiction, as Andreotti and Lahiji suggest, can lead to phantasmagoria. Muller promotes an alternative way of perceiving the city that builds on a strange fascination for the slums that seems to have erupted in post independent Colombo as the city struggled to cope with its new found independence, postcoloniality and modernity. The stories show Colombo’s failure to be a welfare city as developmental policies fail to improve people’s lives and inequality and conflict becomes the core of the economic expansion of Sri Lanka.

In *The Hungry Ghosts*, Selvadurai highlights the difference between the poor in Sri Lanka and the poor in Canada. The poor are a common category of people in both the countries. However, while Canada encourages the poor to better their lives, Colombo pushes the economically downtrodden communities further into anonymity. Shivan and his family, as Tamils (Shivan’s father is Tamil), belonged to the minority in both Sri Lanka and Canada. Shivan saw that his grandmother treated the poor and other Tamils with utter disgust. She justified her actions by saying that the Tamils are better off than the Sinhalese; the Tamils who emigrate to Australia and Canada are much richer than the Sinhalese. Shivan contests this idea by saying, “No, Aacho, that is not so. Tamils are poor in those countries, very poor” (Selvadurai 160), thereby, highlighting the diasporic experience of Tamils in Canada. Shivan himself goes to Canada lured by its promise of cultural hybridity but he finds that racialization is hidden within the folds of multiculturalism in Canada. Family Class Migrants like Shivan and his family, upon their arrival at Canada had to “double up” with their family and friends that triggered the problem of overcrowding and “hidden homelessness” in the host city. It is a struggle for the migrants to find a house for themselves due to acute shortage of houses and they end up becoming soft targets to high rent demands. The Subramaniams extracted much money from Shivan’s mother on the pretext of offering them shelter. The dominant white communities in Canada look down upon the minority communities of color and harbor certain stereotypical beliefs about them. This leads to Asian “cultural ghettoization” in those places. Shivan notices that the Sri Lankan community in Canada frequents certain spaces that bring to fore the idea of racialized space and community construction in Canada. The marginalized communities feel the need to carve out their own space in their struggle for recognition and inclusion within the multicultural landscape of Canadian society and thus, the racialized spaces reflect power relations within society. The inner city slums in Canada are examples of how state structures erect spaces to “ghettoize” and exclude marginalized racial

groups from the rest of the society. Selvadurai, however, highlights that despite everything else Canada is still more hospitable than Colombo. Canada is home to a number of Jaffna Tamil boys, who otherwise in Sri Lanka are either killed or forced to join extremist groups. Colombo forces its' own citizens to find "home" elsewhere, whereas Canada accepts even a refugee as its own citizen and provides them with "home".

### **The Streets of Colombo**

The Streets of Colombo, in Muller and Selvadurai's fiction, display contestations over public space, citizenship, power and urban reconfiguration; it is a mix of imaginations – of modernity, globalization, cosmopolitanism and tradition. The shopping malls, grand hotels, luxury apartments, latest fashion and luxury cars stands as testimony to Colombo's aspirations to be a world-class city. However, Colombo also cannot do without the street hawkers, congestion, dirt, lawlessness, beggars, porters and labourers- those elements which the writers suggest-define the essence of Colombo. The writers represent the dialectical character of the streets as they stand for contradictory things: wealth and poverty, local practices and globally circulating commodities, the sacred and the profane.

In the novels, the narrator/ protagonist, a spectator of the urban landscape, is a prototype of Walter Benjamin and Baudelaire's *flâneur*, a gentleman stroller of streets. He is an explorer, a modern urban spectator who inspects the city while remaining a detached spectator. Interestingly, while in Muller's *Colombo*, the narrator remains a detached spectator of the street, Selvadurai's Shivan, to a certain extent, does not remain detached, but a participant – someone of the street who shares the experience of being in the street, both in Colombo and in Canada. He finds himself comparing Colombo with Toronto and Vancouver.

Shivan takes into account the way streets in Colombo are bifurcated into lanes and bye lanes; the way the streets in the elite areas are clear and smooth but those in the dilapidated areas rough and uneven, and the way streets transformed into sites of communal violence during riots. *The Hungry Ghosts* throws light into post-independence urban planning in Sri Lanka. "Town planning", a western concept, as Edward Relph suggests, began as a reaction against industrialization and was treated as a means of "providing grand solutions to all urban problems, either by radical redevelopment for city beautification or by the construction of entirely new garden cities" (63-64). Town planning is accompanied by other western ideas such as "zoning" and "street design". Another 20<sup>th</sup> century western concept, "Garden Cities" aimed at making a community surrounded by nature "containing proportionate areas of residences, industry and agriculture" (Waterford 81). Garden cities demand zoning, i.e., targeting a particular area in the country/city and ordering them as per the plan. As far as Colombo is concerned, the British in the 19<sup>th</sup> century had a huge project of making Colombo a "Garden City of the East". Sir Patrick Geddes made the first plan for Colombo in 1921; others followed this such as Sir Leslie Patrick Abercrombie's plan in 1948

and the first Master Plan of Colombo Metropolitan Region in 1978. However, not all parts of the city received equal attention and even in the post-colonial period, the condition of the roads became typical of the areas to which they belong. The poorer streets became a metaphor for poverty, marginalization and corruption.

The figure of the prostitute in the streets, as suggested earlier, is a primary trope in *Colombo*, symbolizing social suffering and degradation. Muller highlights streets in prime areas in Colombo such as the Slave Island, Fort Railway Station, Pettah, Maradana and Borella that transforms from "the regular street used to drive and hawk and beg during the day" (Gandhi 209) into "a place where single women with bright makeup and bold stares and stand at night" (Gandhi 209). The prostitute figure adds an element of eroticism to the street as she makes a "living of the debris of the streets and sells her wares in the market place" (Nord 5). She becomes a means to satisfy the demand for pleasure in the city and epitomizes the fleeting nature of urban relations; in her sexuality, she marks "the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent" (Nord 5), those very qualities that Baudelaire associates with modernity. In *Colombo*, the depiction of the prostitute amidst the dirt and squalor of city streets is metaphorically connected with the unhygienic and contaminated conditions of urban life, with the wastes, poverty, vagrancy and all kinds of vices of the streets.

The overwhelming presence of the poor and criminals on the streets makes Muller's flâneur shape the reality of the streets of Colombo as dialectically and paradoxically structured as the space is a constant friction between two kinds of spectacles – the spectacle of the poor and outcasts and the spectacle of the grand.

According to R. P. Mishra, "Colombo attracts about 1.5 million people from neighboring areas on any working day. The resident population plus the floating population during the daytime add up to more than 2 million. It is estimated that 50 percent of the commuting population arrives in the city for employment, business, and education" (427). Many of these immigrants are incorporated into the urban economy as informal wage earners. In *Colombo*, Lakshmi's family exemplifies this. Lakshmi's father, "a thin, wiry man" with a hunch, works as a coolie at Pettah market and pulls "heavy trolley, struggling and panting each time it twisted in the potholes of the nightmare street" (Muller 149). People like them are the street's underclass; they are the drivers, labourers, cleaners, beggars, street performers, etc. who physically overpower the street but are absent from its consciousness. The phantasmagoric quality of the streets is highlighted in its dreamlike and fluid quality to transform itself into many things – it is a home for the underclass; during daytime, they congregate at the street waiting for employers to hire them, and at nighttime, the street is their bedroom. At night and during festivals and celebrations, the street emerges as the haunt of criminals. In "The Leafy Mango Tree", the rapist Justin roams around at night looking for his prey. In "Let Sleeping Gods Lie", Oscar's daughter Nelum is assaulted and abused as she goes to see the spectacular Vesak festival with her family: "someone squeezed Nelum, dug a finger into the cleft of her buttocks,

brushed a hand against her breast" (Muller 89). Thus, the streets of Colombo represent the paradoxes inherent in the notion of modernity itself.

In *The Hungry Ghosts*, Selvadurai presents a comparison between the streets of Toronto and that of Colombo. In Toronto, Shivan frequented the streets of Kensington Market and the Queen Street and found them as an embodiment of Canada's multicultural spirit. As a homosexual, he appreciated Toronto's "cold" and indifferent attitude towards foreigners. Shivan does mention that he experienced some amount of racism in the bars, however, on hindsight, Shivan favours the streets of Canada over the streets in Colombo that he saw, turned into sites of violence during the civil war. Shivan highlights that in 1983, when Colombo was in the grip of communal riots between the Sinhalese and the Tamils, the streets became a site of large gang attacking activities. The streets became a place for political spectacle, a space for slogan raising, procession and rallies of violent people. The small alleys and lanes in Colombo, that usually were points of contact between people of various communities emerge as palimpsests of narratives of victimization, persecution and retaliation. Shivan highlights how during the riots, some Sinhalese people helped their Tamil neighbours escape the brunt of violence, while there were others who turned against their own neighbours and moved into streets to burn down Tamil houses. Aacho helps a Tamil family migrate to Canada but on the condition that they sell their house for the lowest price possible. In another instance, Aacho gets Mili, Shivan's homosexual partner in Colombo, killed by the goons. Thus, the streets are manifestation of intolerance and resentment towards the minorities and highlight the paradoxes inherent in the notion of modernity in the postcolonial city.

Thus, Muller and Selvadurai ultimately represent Colombo as a real place with real problems. Their representation defies the audience's expectations to see an exotic and heavenly place. Muller, in his narrative, incorporates as he subverts the exotic descriptions of Colombo by travellers from the West – Pablo Neruda called Ceylon "a pearl of greenness, flower of the island, tower of beauty" (Muller 246); Anton Chekov called Ceylon "the site of paradise" where he enjoyed "dalliance with a dark-eyed Hindu girl ... in a coconut grove on a moonlit night" (Muller 247) and Andre Malraux found "Colombo one of the calmest places on earth" (Muller 247) – by putting disease, death and poverty at the center of narrating Colombo. Muller's analysis of the everyday life of his characters brings forth the corrupt and dehumanized face of the city; for the characters Colombo is anything but a dream space. There is a conscious effort on the part of the writers to resist the stereotypical way of looking at the Sri Lankan landscape as pristine and paradisiacal. The writers overturn the inherited traditions associated with European romanticism by refiguring and reimaging the postcolonial landscapes of Sri Lanka in new ways. They do not uncritically replicate the modes of landscape and they highlight the perceived otherness of the landscape as the basis for a distinctive Sri Lankan identity. Instead of initiating a pastoral or wilderness narrative, the writers opt to map the landscape by placing the struggles of the island– poverty, overpopulation, collapsing eco-systems,

militarization, terrorism, industrialization, death and disease— at the center thereby offering a counter narrative.

### **Notes :**

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- <sup>1</sup> See Muller's *Once Upon a Tender Time, The Jam Fruit Tree and Yakada Yaka*.
- <sup>2</sup> In another study, *Representing Calcutta: Modernity, nationalism and the colonial uncanny* (2005), by Swati Chattopadhyay, Calcutta is shown as a place where modernity has gone astray.
- <sup>3</sup> Walter Benjamin, as explained by Buck-Morss, understood modern experience as one that is neurological and based on the experience of shock. Buck-Morss explains that Benjamin believed that consciousness usually protected a person from the “excessive energies” of stimuli; however, without consciousness, excessive energy or stimuli of the modern experience may result in what he calls shock and trauma. See Buck-Morss's *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (1989).

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## **TO BE OR NOT TO BE? THE DICHOTOMY OF BEING ONESELF IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE NAMESAKE***

**Priyanka Sharma**

### **Abstract**

Whether it is a forced or a conscious re-location, the migrants are neither able to cast off their inherited legacy nor encapsulate themselves in the new socio-cultural environment. In a perilous balance between two cultures, building a bridge by forging a middle path is similar to the act of walking on a tight rope. Such is the life of the immigrants who venture out to make their own living away from their native lands. The migrant writers bring out the problems of the impact of migration on people with respect to the situation of identity crisis emerging out of various factors in an alien location. This paper will study the crisis of identity as experienced by the characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* from a postcolonial perspective.

**Keywords :** Jhumpa Lahiri; migration; identity crisis; diaspora, culture; immigrant

We are like "chiffon sarees" – a sort of cross-breed attempting to adjust to the pressures of a new world, while actually being from another older one.  
(Jussawalla 583)

In a perilous balance between two cultures, building a bridge by forging a middle path is similar to the act of walking on a tight rope. Such is the life of the immigrants who venture out to make their own living away from their native lands. This paper will study the crisis of identity as experienced by the characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2006) from a postcolonial perspective. The eminent critic, Stuart Hall, in *Colonial Discourses and Post Colonial Theory: A Reader*(1994) observes "diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference." According to him, the diaspora experience "is defined, not by the essence or purity but by recognition of heterogeneity and diversity, by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, differences" (402).

To understand Lahiri's predicament from the roots, we need to look into Indian Diaspora in the United States of America (USA). Hiral Macwan in the

article “Struggle for Identity and Diaspora in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*” mentions that the first significant presence of the Indians appeared almost one hundred years ago when peasants from the province of Punjab started migrating the West Coast for seeking employment in Washington load mills and California’s vast agricultural fields (45-46). Though predominantly Sikhs, they were described in the popular press as “Hindus”, and almost from the beginning they were seen as incomparable, possessed of “immodest and filthy habits”, the “most undesirable of all the eastern Asiatic races....” (45-46). The subsequent waves of migration included students and “professional Indians” especially in the early sixties went to the United States as a part of “brain drain” (Spivak 61). Moreover, the IT wave and rising economy attracted a large number of Indians who emigrated to the USA. In certain cases, migration was triggered by political factors and religious discrimination as well (Macwan 45-46).

As the novel *The Namesake* opens we find Ashima Ganguly in the kitchen preparing a concoction which she has been consuming since her pregnancy. Right from the beginning Lahiri sheds light on the diasporic sensibilities through the description of the settings or characters. She leaves traces at places for the readers to grasp the things left unsaid. For instance, Ashima’s wish for mustard oil is an essential ingredient in the kitchen of every Indian household. A drop or two of mustard oil would complete her combination of “Rice Krispies, Planter peanuts, chopped red onion,” to which she adds “salt, lemon juice, thin slices of green chili pepper” (Lahiri 1).

In the hospital where she is admitted to deliver her first child, numerous thoughts cross her mind. “She wonders if she is the only Indian person in the hospital, but a gentle twitch from the baby reminds her that she is, technically speaking, not alone” (3-4). Infact, she finds it very strange that her child will be born in a hospital where people enter as patients or to die. In India instead the lady is sent away from her in-laws or husbands to her parents’ home, giving birth to the child under the supervision of the neighbourhood women.

But nothing feels normal to Ashima. For the past eighteen months, ever since she’s arrived in Cambridge nothing has felt normal at all. It’s not so much pain, which she knows, somehow, she will survive. It’s the consequence: motherhood in a foreign land... That it was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved... But she is terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare. (5-6)

Ashima has been struggling for eighteen months, since the day she landed in America. Born and brought up in a typical Indian Bengali household, she feels uprooted in the foreign land. A sense of loss, nostalgia coupled with the fear of bringing up her child alone in America define the emotional predicament of the migrants. It is true that the first-generation migrants would experience it even more intensely. Smriti Singh comments:

It is said about Indian women that they are born in an expatriate state and the movements away from home to an alien country is only an accentuation of gendered exile they have borne all along. Survival in their case is the need to survive the pain of uprooting and the 'shock of arrival'. This is followed by the struggle to surmount the obstacles and comfortably adapt to the new environment. (62)

The conflict within an individual because of the contrast between the environment within the house of an Indian family and the American setting outside, generally gives rise to the situation of crisis. One cannot adhere to either of the two cultures. This is the case especially with Gogol Ganguli, the protagonist of *The Namesake*. His result of identity crisis is nevertheless also because of his name. Awaiting a letter to be arrived from Ashima's grandmother which contains the name of the child to be born to Ashima, the couple end up naming their child "Gogol" under the pressure of hospital authorities. It is officially mandatory to give their child a legal name before getting discharged from the hospital. In India, "names can wait" and the elders of the family decide the 'good name', usually when the child has to enroll himself in a school (25).

Jhumpa Lahiri, like Gogol, is her pet name which her school authorities record as the official name as it is easier than her other names like Nilanjana or Sudeshna. And through these and for other reasons she feels neglected. In an interview released by Houghton Mifflin Company she explains: "As a young child, I felt that the Indian part of me was unacknowledged, and therefore somehow negated, by my American environment, and vice versa. I felt that I led two very separate lives" (Das 178).

This problem of naming/ mis-naming, faced by Ashoke and Ashima in America is an example of the kind of cultural dilemma the immigrants face in the foreign land. It is difficult to make the foreigners understand this distinction. The manners of the immigrants are mocked at. As a result they feel bewildered at this humiliation. They show all forms of resistance. It is here, at this juncture the conflict occurs when there is a tension between the codes of the two distinct cultures.

Lahiri quotes Dostoyevsky's saying in the novel— "We all came out of Gogol's overcoat" (78). When she was asked in an interview as above, if the Russian novelist Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol had any influence on her as a writer, she replied:

"I'm not sure influence is the right word. I don't turn to Gogol as consistently as I do to certain other writers when I'm struggling with character or language. His writing is more overtly comic, more antic and absurd than mine tends to be. But I admire his work enormously and reread a lot of it as I was working on the novel, in addition to reading biographical material. "The overcoat" is such a superb story. It really does haunt me the way it haunts the character of Ashoke in the novel ...without the inspiration of Nikolai Gogol, without his name and without his writing, my novel would never, have been

conceived. In that respect, this book came out of Gogol's overcoat, quite literally." (Das 180-181)

To understand the significance of this in the life of Ashoke and ultimately as an inheritance to his son Gogol, we need to analyze the life-changing episode in the life of Ashoke. On October 20, 1961, when Ashoke is twenty-two, he travels to Ranchi from Howrah to visit his grandparents. The only book he carries is a collection of short stories by Nikolai Gogol, gifted to him by his grandfather when he graduates from class twelve. As the train starts pulling from the station, he begins rereading his favourite in the collection, "The Overcoat". What is captivating for him is the story of Akaky Akakievich, a humble clerk, who loves his work of merely copying the contents of any document written by others. His colleagues used to bully this odd, weird, impoverished clerk.

Each time reading the account of Akaky's christening, the series of queer names his mother had rejected he laughed aloud. Ashoke was always devastated when Akaky was robbed... leaving him cold and vulnerable, and Akaky's death some pages later, never failed to bring tears to his eyes... Just as Akaky's ghost haunted the final pages, so did it haunt a place deep in Ashoke's soul, shedding light on all that was irrational, all that was inevitable about the world. (14)

Here in the train, Ashoke has a chance meeting with Mr. Ghosh, a co-traveller who advises him to visit England and America while he is still young and free. "Do yourself a favour. Before it's too late, without thinking too much about it first, pack a pillow and a blanket and see as much of the world as you can. You will not regret it. One day it will be too late" he tells Ashoke (16).

At two-thirty in the morning, 209 kilometers from Calcutta, this train meets with an accident. This is the most traumatic incident of his life, the thought of which makes him shudder even now. Badly injured and lying amid the rubble that night, he hears the voice of the rescue party, and somehow is able to raise his hand clutching the page of 'The Overcoat' which finally brings him to notice, therefore he gets rescued. This accident makes him limp slightly at the left foot for his life. But it is a kind of rebirth to him. Not only because of his deep-seated love for his favourite author, which he considers the lucky charm for saving his life, Ashoke holds the author in deep regard and seeks inspiration from him. He feels special kind of kinship with him. As a person he wants to leave India and travel to various places in order to carve a new identity different from the one he had in India. Like Ashoke, even Nikolai Gogol had spent most of his adult life outside his home. Therefore, he keeps the name of his first-born child as 'Gogol', unaware of the fact that this pet name would turn into an official name which would torment his child throughout his growing years.

Ashima raises Gogol with pride. Since Ashoke has been "hired as an Assistant Professor of Electrical Engineering at the University" they shift to a University town outside Boston (48). It is more distressing for Ashima, much

more than moving from Calcutta to Cambridge. Feeling lonely and displaced in the foreign land, Ashima begins to realize:

... being a foreigner... is a sort of life –long – pregnancy – a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous felling of out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that previous life had vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect. (49)

To be in a foreign country and to sustain oneself is a very big challenge. The above quoted lines are true not only for Ashima but any immigrant. The “constant burden” mentioned by Lahiri is the burden on their shoulders to not only keep themselves intact in the foreign land but also to preserve or conserve the culture and the tradition of their native lands which the immigrants carry with themselves. The feeling of being out of place, dislocated or displaced is one of the central themes of diasporic writing and Lahiri has been successful enough to portray the same through the character of Ashima. Although the second-generation immigrants adopt and assimilate in the host country yet their identity is related to the migration history of their parents and grandparents. The first generation migrants always have a greater difficulty settling down in a new land than the second generation who fit much easily, like Gogol and Sonia.

As a child Gogol could hardly understand the reasons behind the sudden change of his name at school. When he is repeatedly asked questions by calling him ‘Nikhil’ at school by the principal Mrs. Lapidus, Gogol does not respond. It is perplexing for her to understand that if the child has been legally named as ‘Gogol Ganguli’, why is there the need to call him by ‘Nikhil’ at the school. Finally, she settles at the name of ‘Gogol’ since she realizes that only when addressed by this name does the child respond. This happens because the principal is unaware of the general trend of naming the kids in an Indian Bengali household. It is taxing for the Americans to understand this tradition of naming. To avoid unnecessary speculation or confusion, at the time of the birth of Gogol’s sister, Ashoke and Ashima are ready with a name—‘Sonali’.

Assimilation, i.e., individuals or groups of differing heritages acquiring the basic habits, attitudes and modes of life of an embracing culture is visible in the novel at many instances.

The Gangulis learn to roast turkeys, albeit rubbed with garlic and cumin and cayenne, at Thanksgiving, to nail wreath to their door in December, to wrap woolen scarves around snowmen, to colour boiled eggs violet or pink at Easter and hide them around the house. For the sake of Gogol and Sonia they celebrate, with progressively increasing fanfare, the birth of Christ, an event the children look forward to far more than the worship of Durga and Saraswati. (64)

Gogol and Sonia themselves love being at home during Christmas, while during pujas, they are required to throw marigold petals at a card board effigy of a goddess and eat bland vegetarian food. “At the insistence of Gogol, Ashima makes him an American dinner once a week as a treat” (65). Young Gogol hates his Bengali classes and wishes to be at a ballet or softball practice, and also because it keeps him away from his drawing classes.

The peculiarity of his name becomes prominent to him when one day in the sixth grade on a field trip, the children are taken to a graveyard and are asked to trace out the names by rubbing crayons against the newsprint. Gogol, one after another, comes across very unique names, their oddness and flamboyance appeals to him. But back at home Ashima is horrified at hearing this kind of a project. She does not make place for the rubbings in the kitchen where his other creations are displayed. But for reasons unexplained he cannot do away with them. He finds a kind of connection with the names. He puts them behind his chest of drawers rather than throwing away the paper rolls as instructed by his mother.

The fascination for the peculiarity of his name is not for long because gradually this same peculiarity torments him. On Gogol’s fourteenth birthday Ashoke gifts him *The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol*. “Do you know what Dostoyevsky once said?” says Ashoke as he reaches to the door of Gogol’s room. “We all came out of Gogol overcoat”. “What’s that supposed to mean?” retorts Gogol all confused. “It will make sense to you one day”, remarks Ashoke (78). Probably what he means to say here is that had it not for the Russian author, Gogol would not have been born. Ashoke somehow feels indebted to the author for the pages of his short story saving his own life in the train wreck. Also, he followed the author’s example and made his life outside homeland. Just as the pages of the book protected him, on a deeper level cosmic power protects all human beings, and so does the overcoat.

Ashoke wants his son to know the reasons behind gifting him the book because of the sentiments attached to it. But he does not want to narrate the story of his near-to-death experience to his child on his birthday. So he decides to keep everything to himself, until one night when Gogol comes home in the weekend during his graduation years, Ashoke does reveal the entire story to him. Gogol is utterly shocked at this revelation. Until then he just knew the fact that Nikolai Gogol was his father’s favourite author and his father limps because he probably met with an accident while playing soccer, but now he feels like a stone and he becomes numb for a moment. Different emotions run through him like disgust, embarrassment, and fear. He takes time to “absorb the information, feeling awkward, oddly ashamed, at fault” (120). He apologizes to his dad and suddenly the pet name which he has been hearing all this while means completely different to him. A name related to such a ‘catastrophe’ Gogol asks his father, “Do I remind you of that night?” “Not at all. You remind me of everything that followed” says Ashoke (124).

Here we can clearly draw a line of demarcation between the fourteen year old Gogol, who tosses away the book gifted to him by his dad and the one to whom the truth is revealed. Probably, Ashoke does the right thing by not revealing to him the story because at that age, Gogol would not have been able to understand the sentiments attached to his name. There is always a unique quality in the relationships that exists among people in India like father-son, mother-daughter, husband-wife, brother-sister or friends. All these relations are bound by sentiments of love, understanding, friendship and many more emotions. No matter how far people stay, but the warmth of love always binds them together. Gogol, although feels restless at home, as he grows up, confines himself to his own room in the college days because he loves being there all alone, on his own, without any sort of prohibitions upon him.

In his growing years Gogol suffers from the stigma that he feels attached to his name. A name he got by accident. Every now and then he is asked questions regarding his name. Gogol has a different perception of his name:

The writer he is named after – Gogol isn't his first name. His first name is Nikolai. Not only does Gogol Ganguli have a pet name turned good name, but a last name turned first name. And so, it occurs to him that no one he knows in the world, in Russia or India or America or anywhere, shares his name. Not even the source of his namesake. (78)

In fact, identity is one's state of being. It is what or who a person is and how distinct he is from others. Amartya Sen defines identity as fluid, multi-dimensional, pluralistic that cannot be limited to a singular identity. The question of identity arises due to migration and exile particularly after the end of colonial rule. It becomes a very complex phenomenon in the era of globalization, to locate and define a specific place for oneself. Kathryn Woodward in *Identity and Difference* argues:

Identities in the contemporary world derive from a multiplicity of sources from nationality, ethnicity, social class, community, gender, sexuality—sources may conflict in the construction of identity positions and lead to contradictory fragmented identities .... Identity gives us an idea who we are and how we relate to others and to the world in which we live. (1)

It is seen that identity is often constructed in terms of binary oppositions—self/ other, us/ them, insider/ outsider, black/ white, man/ woman etc. And these binaries are culturally determined. Stuart Hall also makes an interesting study in his essay “Culture Identity and Diaspora” (2003) where he says, “Identity is not as transparent and unproblematic as we think.” According to Hall there are two kinds of identity – “first, identity as being that includes a sense of commonality, and second, identity as ‘becoming’” He remarks this with relation to diasporic identities and uses Derrida’s theory of ‘difference/ difference’ to explain the same. For him ‘difference’ becomes ‘difference’ when meaning is always postponed or deferred by a chain of signifiers. That means, the meaning is not

fixed, static or stable. Similarly, identities are forever changing, with no fixities or stability (401-402).

Although Gogol and Sonia have Indian ancestry, they are Americans by birth. Apart from their own home, they do not get the Indian atmosphere anywhere. Therefore, when they visit India, they aren't at ease with the typical Bengali household habits, customs and rituals. Gogol and Sonia suffer from cultural conflict under such circumstances. Gogol and Sonia "from time to time, privately admit to excruciating cravings, for hamburgers or a slice of pepperoni pizza or a cold glass of milk" (84).

In their visit to Delhi, Gogol and Sonia are powerfully affected by the legend of how the thumbs were cut off of the twenty-two thousand builders who built the Taj Mahal. Gogol attempts to sketch the dome and some part of the façade but the grace of the building evades and he quits the attempt. Perhaps this can be compared to that situation when any westerner tries to understand India, its culture, heritage and tradition but ultimately finds himself utterly befuddled amidst everything. Like the character of Mrs. Moore, the sympathetic, old lady from E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, who although sincerely attempts to understand India fails in her attempt, especially in the cave episode where she does not enter the Marabar Caves because she feels puzzled by the entire situation. Although Gogol isn't completely a foreigner but by being born and brought up in America and visiting India as a tourist once in a couple of years, it becomes difficult for him to decipher the true meaning.

In one of his classes Gogol is taught the shortstory of *The Overcoat* by Nikolai Gogol enlisted in the syllabus. As Mr. Lawson proceeds in his teaching, Gogol starts retreating into himself more and more.

He is celebrated today as one of Russia's most brilliant writers ...eccentric genius. Gogol's life, in a nutshell, was a steady decline into madness ...an intelligent, queer and sickly creature ...a hypochondriac and a deeply paranoid, frustrated man ...morbidly melancholic, given to fits of severe depression. (91)

Gogol feels that his parents have never mentioned this part of the writer. He can no longer tolerate the voice of his teacher. He lowers his head on the desk, presses his ears with both his hands to prevent himself from hearing the teacher's voice and shuts his eyes. Till now it is the eccentricity of the name which becomes intolerable to him but now learning about the pathetic life of writer, he cannot even feel the slightest of connection with the name. He feels as though he and his works are being attacked when his classmates express displeasure after knowing about Nikolai Gogol. "To read the story, he believes, would mean paying tribute to his namesake, accepting it somehow. Still, listening to his classmates complain, he feels perversely responsible, as if his own work were being attacked" (92).

These activities of Gogol are a clear indication that he is not at all at ease with his name. As it is, an immigrant feels ‘nowhere’ in the host country, on top of that, Gogol, although a second generation immigrant, feels ostracized because of the peculiarity of his name. He cannot even connect to his own name and he starts feeling ashamed. He is tired of the constant questions, or shrinking of faces when they hear his name for the first time. Because of this low self-esteem he dates nobody in high school, does not attend dances or parties and suffers quiet crushes. But the impact of environment proves to play an important role and therefore Gogol starts to experiment with things which were considered taboo such as cigarettes and smoking pot. At one such party he meets a girl named Kim, who introduces herself to him but when it comes for Gogol’s turn, he starts getting perplexed, desperately searching for another name and finally settles on ‘Nikhil’, the other name which was once chosen for him. At the age of eighteen, he rejects his name or rather the identity imposed by his father. The name “Nikhil” serves as his symbolic overcoat by wearing which he would become an American thereby erasing the presence of Gogol. As readers we tend to feel that the problem in the novel is only regarding the name—“Gogol”. But at a deeper level we realize that it reflects a larger anxiety whereby the migrant people can neither call themselves completely Indians nor completely Americans.

Sitting in the waiting room of a dentist, he comes across the article ‘Second Baptisms’, published in an issue of Reader’s Digest. He realizes that many famous celebrities, laureates, actors and writers have their names changed. Therefore he now wants to change his name. He “feels that he is overstepping them (parents), correcting a mistake they’ve made” (101). He wishes to come out of that shadow of his parents and yearns to assert his one independent identity.

... now that he is Nikhil it's easier to ignore his parents, to tune out their concerns and pleas... It is as Nikhil, that in the first semester, he grows a goatee, starts smoking Camel Lights at parties and while writing papers and before exams, loses his virginity at a party with a girl ...there is only one complication: he does not feel like Nikhil ...after eighteen years of Gogol, two months of Nikhil feel scant, inconsequential.(106)

Identity is dynamic, multiple, and multi-faceted. This is what Gogol needs to understand. Gogol thinks that he should be either an Indian or an American at a single point of time which in turn triggers his identity crisis. He should be open to accept multiplicity and ambiguity. Judith Caesar, a critic of Lahiri’s works is of the opinion that, Ashoke Ganguli does the perfect thing by trying to give his sons two names to survive in this complex world. Had Gogol accepted his ‘bhalonam’ and ‘daaknaam’, his problem of identity would be solved. It would assert that he is perceived differently by different people at different situations - who he is to his family, the people who love and care for him and the other he, who is the one to the outside world.

When Gogol starts dating Ruth, he wants to tell his parents about his first girlfriend but “he has no patience for their surprise, their nervousness, their quiet disappointment, and their questions about what Ruth’s parents did and whether

or not the relationship was serious" (115). Infact, Gogol pities his parents thinking that they have had no experience of being young and in love. His relationship with Ruth is severed after she leaves for a summer course in Oxford.

Gogol considers his parents as the ones who cannot normally accept that their son is seeing somebody. In India, it is usually the parents who select the partners for their children, unlike America where the children take their own independent decisions with no interference from the parents. The social norms and codes play a significant role in India plays unlike in America where couples are given the independence to stay together or fall apart. Through these details, we realize the differences that exist among various cultures. So naturally when the children of the migrants grow up in a new culture, they tend to identify with a new worldview leading to an awkward intergenerational conflict between the parents and the children. The contrast between first generation and second-generation migrants clearly reveals the difficulties of the process of acculturation.

In 1994, after graduating from Columbia University in architecture Gogol takes up a job with a new firm at New York. There he gets involved with his second girlfriend Maxine, whom he meets at a party. Gogol is invited to dinner one day and the genial atmosphere at her home completely takes over him. He starts visiting them often, and much to his strangeness he likes the frankness and openness with which Maxine's parents handle the matter. He is never used to this kind of amiability. Her parents are least bothered about their visits. Infact, he goes back to her home after work as a routine. He even stays overnight and makes love to her. To his utter dismay, "Gerald and Lydia think nothing, in the mornings, when he and Maxine join them downstairs in the kitchen, their hair uncombed, seeking bowls of café au lait and toasted slices of French bread and jam. The first morning he sleeps over he's been mortified to face them," but they are not bothered as usual. It is just not possible for him to fall in love with Maxine alone. He is in love with "the house, and Gerald and Lydia's manner of living" (137). Seeing her parents, curled up in sofa in a romantic mood, he is reminded of his own parents' relationship which is "an utterly private, uncelebrated thing" (138). Within six months he gets the keys to their house, formally presented to him "on a silver tiffany chain" (140). He does all the chores of the house as Americans do like taking the dog out for a walk, preparing for weekend parties, washing the dishes and much more.

Gogol's own internal conflict with himself makes him ponder over the differences between Maxine and himself. The biggest difference he finds is that unlike him, she happily accepts her life and the fact that who she is as an individual. She does not crave to be somebody else at any time. She respects her origin, her home, her birthplace, and her past affairs. She does not feel suffocated around her parent's presence as he does. She sincerely loves dwelling beside them in her own secure place. This study of the differences by Gogol reflects his desperation for the resolution of his inner conflict bringing his own stability. With this subtlety Lahiri brings out the diasporic sensibilities.

Maxine's parents go to their Lake house in New Hampshire, leaving Maxine and Gogol by themselves. Although he has the entire house to himself, he does not feel independent. He feels that even in their absence, Gerald and Lydia are supervising his activities. A sense to become the master of the house overpowers. Though Gogol makes conscious efforts to be different from his parents and live away from the shadows of Bengali culture, he experiences cultural dilemma on a number of occasions. The in-between-ness and belonging to nowhere is experienced by him more intensely. According to Rushdie migrants suffer from "triple disruption comprising the loss of roots both the linguistic and social dislocation" (279).

Gogol visits his parents with Maxine whom he had instructed that they would not be able to touch each other or kiss in front of his parents, and no wine would be served with lunch. Maxine is amused. She takes this as "a single afternoon's challenge, an anomaly never to be repeated" (146). Maxine addresses his parents by their first name as Americans do. Gogol cannot process that these are not the problems of his family or shortcomings which he should be ashamed of but it is the result of cultural differences. Like a betrayer, he rejects everything Indian starting from food habits to clothing and conversational style but more than anything else he rejects his own identity.

At Maxine's lake house Gogol loves being aloof, cut off from the outside world. He starts appreciating that idyllic place. He enjoys running around the lake with Gerald, swimming over to their grandparent's house with Maxine, spending the entire nights by the lake making love to her, and sitting idly with nothing to do. He doubts if his parents would like such a life.

They would have felt lonely in this setting, remarking that they were the only Indians. They would not want to go hiking, as he and Maxine and Gerald and Lydia do almost everyday, up the rocky mountain trails, to watch the sun set over the valley... His mother would not put on a bathing suit or swim. (155)

The incident of his father's death has left Gogol cold and numb from within. He does not engage in conversation with Maxine at the dinner table, is indifferent in bed and becomes too private in his thoughts and activities. He visits his family every weekend and converses over telephone every evening. The guilt of distancing himself from his family, distances himself from Maxine. Gogol finally walks out of the relationship with her.

After his father's death Gogol fondly remembers the times he has spent with him. One among them is when Ashoke takes Gogol on a walk on Cape Cod, standing over the last piece of land from where they could go no further. Ashoke says, "Try to remember it always ...Remember that you and I made this journey, that we went together to a place where there was nowhere left to go" (187). Although these lines do not make any sense to him then, but now he somewhere realizes that his father wanted him to discover a path for himself to assert his own identity.

Like Gogol, Moushumi Mazoomdar is the daughter of immigrant parents from India. Though unwilling, Gogol meets her under the pressure of Ashima and develops a liking for her. At a party with Moushumi's friends, Donald and Astrid, who are acquainted to her through her ex-fiancé Graham, addresses Gogol as 'Graham' by mistake, while Moushumi reveals to all that Gogol has changed his name to 'Nikhil'. Gogol does not expect her to blurt out the secret. "He stares at her, stunned. He has never told her not to tell anyone. He simply assumed she never would. His expression is lost on her; she smiles back at him, unaware of what she has done" (243). Even Moushumi suffers from the same problem as Gogol. Instead of creating her own identity, she searches for stability and identity through multiple relationships. Moushumi begins an extra-marital affair with Dimitri Desjardin which ends her marriage with Gogol. Probably they chose one another unconsciously in order to remain connected to their family values and childhood after being disillusioned from their previous affairs. Moushumi's sense of identity is much more insecure and complex since she suffers from a broken relationship. This relationship had given her identity but when it is shattered even her own identity is shattered. Gogol is only a substitute of 'Graham', her former fiancé. The most ironical thing out here is that according to the preconceived notion that people from the same cultural background would live in harmony, is reversed. Gogol's parents consider his involvement with Maxine as momentary. She is an American and her American way of life troubles them. But according to Ashima, in the case of Moushumi she tries to make an almost perfect match by getting his son Gogol married to a girl of Indian ancestry; still their marriage does not work.

Ashima, proving true to the meaning of her name 'without borders', decides to live in America for six months and in India for six months. After having lived in the Pemberton Road for twenty-seven years, a widow of fifty-three, she is ready to depart to India in the end. During the final get-together at their home, Gogol comes across 'The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol', presented to him on his birthday by his father. It still bears the inscription: "... for Gogol Ganguli ...The man who gave you his name, from the man who gave you your name" (288). Gogol realizes that after his mother is gone, the name Gogol Ganguli would vanish from the lips of his loved ones and so "... cease to exist" (289). This troubles him rather than giving him peace. The name which he hates so much is the first thing his father gives him. "The givers of Gogol's name are far away from him now. One dead. Another, a widow, on the verge of different sort of departure, in order to dwell, as his father does, in a separate world" (289). Although the novel ends here but it is now that Gogol will understand the significance of the sentence "We all came out of Gogol's overcoat" (78).

Salman Rushdie in his *Imaginary Homelands* reflects upon the ambiguity associated with a migrant's space through the following words:

Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools ...But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for

a writer to occupy. If literature is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality, then once again our distance, our long geographical perspective, may provide us with such angles.(18)

This openness of perception is a byproduct of diaspora and helps an individual recognize that the world is an open platform where various interpretations are possible, depicting positivity and progressiveness. Ashima evolves from being a dependent, introvert, coy and home-bound lady to an independent, bold and strong personality. She would not be confined to one country. This shows that not only does she have a deep affinity for India but also now she starts considering America her home where she has spent her life with Ashoke and her children. It is there, in America, that she matures as an individual in all respects. While Gogol, by all means starts realizing that one cannot stick to a particular identity at a time but one has to have multiple identities in order to survive. Also, by understanding the deep-seated meanings, associated with the events of one's life, one can attain peace and stability.

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## **THE IMAGE OF MAHATMA GANDHI IN ADVERTISEMENT : SUBVERTING ITS CONVENTIONAL SEMIOTICS**

**Saba Anish and Dwijen Sharma**

### **Abstract**

This paper examines some select advertisements featuring Gandhi to understand the semiotics built around his image and/ or certain objects associated with him like his specs, stick, slippers, spinning wheel etc., turning him into a sort of ‘fetishized’ object. It is argued that Gandhi’s image is endorsed in various advertisements to promulgate ideals like non-violence, truth, sacrifice, leadership and so on, for which Gandhi unwaveringly stood during his lifetime. Further, the paper also examines some select advertisements featuring Gandhi which destabilize and challenge the already established semiotics built around his image. Thus, it finds that the sign system is fluid in nature. The change in the value system in a society leads to a shift in the semiotics build around the social system.

**Keywords :** Mahatma Gandhi, semiotics, advertisement, social media, fetishism, post-capitalism

One of the fundamental human characteristics is defined by the obsession with meaning. The question of investing meaning to the world involves the process of interpreting signs thereby creating a narrative of representation. Signs include within its ambit a myriad of mediums like words, images, pictures, sounds, flavours, odours, acts, photographs, and objects. However, they become meaningful only when we invest them with some meaning, for in itself they are unable to produce any meaning. This is what Charles Sanders Peirce meant when he said “we think only in signs” (qtd. in Chandler 16). The sign system is, therefore, entwined with the socio-cultural system. The semiotic approach, thus, assumes that all cultural practices are based on and convey meaning through the medium of signs.

This paper examines the images or objects associated with Mahatma Gandhi from a semiotic point of view. Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the Indian nation, has remained one of the most iconographic figures in Indian political, social and cultural spheres. Right from government posters and government advertisements to statues, paintings, cartoons, Gandhi’s images have dominated a myriad of representational and visual media. The objects associated with

Gandhi like the spinning wheel, glasses, stick, slippers, etc. are re-examined through the application of semiotic standards. It also addresses how the use of Gandhi's images in advertisements has turned him from a national figure to an artefact and an exhibit, building a semiotics of its own. The paper further establishes that the semiotics built around Gandhi's image is rather fluid, which means, the sign system is contingent upon the social system, and with the change in the value system in a society, the semiotics built around a social system change. The paper also links such visual representation of Gandhi to the concept of commodity fetishism which in turn can be ascribed to post-capitalist discourse.

### **Semiotics and Media**

In his *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), Ferdinand de Saussure conceived of a discipline, which would be governed by the laws of linguistics, studying signs in social life. He observed that "by considering rites, customs etc. as signs, it will be possible, I believe, we shall throw new lights on the facts and point up the need for including them in a science of semiology and explaining them by its laws" (Saussure17). Thus, Saussure an semiotics considers the signs found in any system as semiological phenomena, and the signs are interpreted using linguistics rules to get new perspectives.

Most semioticians draw on the analytical approach of structuralism built on Saussure's linguistic model, be it Levi-Strauss in his myth, kinship rules and totemism; Lacan in his study of the unconscious; Barthes and Greimas in their grammar of narrative. Nevertheless, all of them have been engaged, in their distinctive ways, in the study of deep structures underlying the surface structures of phenomena. Based on Saussure's famous langue parole distinction, the traditional Saussurean semioticians have focused more on the langue, that is, the underlying structures and rules rather than specific performances tuning with parole. Saussure himself attempted to study the semiotic system synchronically, rather than diachronically. Even structural cultural theorists have followed the Saussurean model of priority, where social and cultural phenomena are prioritised within semiotic systems. This system of prioritization of structure over usage has been criticised by later Marxist theorists like Valentin Volosinov and Mikhail Bakhtin. Volosinov tried to reverse Saussurean priority of langue over parole, stating "The sign is part of organized social intercourse and cannot exist, as such, outside it, reverting to me a physical artefact" (qtd. in Chandler 14). Saussure was criticised for leaving out historicity in reading signs and, for later semioticians, the meaning of a sign lies in the social context of its use rather than its relationship to other signs within the language. The Prague school linguists, Roman Jakobson and Yuri Tynyanov, negated pure synchronism as an illusion stating that "every synchronic system has its past and its future as inseparable structural elements of the system" (qtd. in Chandler14). Volosinov further observed that "there is no real moment in time when a synchronic system of language could be constructed . . . A synchronic system may be said to exist only from the point of view of the subjective consciousness of an individual speaker

belonging to some particular language group at some particular moment of historical time" (qtd. in Chandler14). Indeed, most contemporary semioticians in their study of sign system have reprioritized historical and social contexts. Even social semioticians like Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress have talked about the importance of the system's social angle and declared that "the social dimensions of semiotic systems are so intrinsic to their nature and function that the systems cannot be studied in isolation" (qtd. in Chandler 14). However, contemporary social semiotics has drifted away from the structuralist concern of internal relations of parts within a self-contained system to the use of signs in more specific social situations.

Contemporary semiotic approach has stepped beyond its traditional academic discipline of analysing text to include in its ambit art, literature, anthropology and the mass media. While for the semioticians a text can be anything from films, television and radio programme to advertising posters, many theorists have suggested reading television and films in terms of language. Some even go to the extent of referring to grammar of media. Saussure's structuralist model of semiotics prioritises language above everything and the French anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss in his *Structural Anthropology* (1973) noted "language is the semiotic system par excellence; it cannot but signify, and exist only through signification" (48).

Claude Levi-Strauss analyses the customs, rituals, totemic objects, designs, myths and folk tales of the people in Brazil, not the way in which these things are produced or used in the lives of the Amazonians, but in terms of the message that their culture communicated. By moving away from the content and delving deep into the underlying rules and codes through which these practices and objects produce meaning, Levi-Strauss takes shelter in Saussurean structuralist approach, that is, to move from the parole of a culture to its underlying structure or langue. For instance, to study the meaning of a television programme or advertisement, the images on the screen have to be treated as signifiers, and the code of a television soap opera or advertisement as a genre. In this way, one can discover how each frame or image on the screen make use of the rules to communicate meaning (signifieds), and on the basis of which the viewer interprets the formal framework of a particular kind of television narrative.

Though most semioticians have accepted Saussure's formulation of linguistics as a branch of semiology, Roland Barthes, on the other hand, tries to invert Saussurean assumption by asserting that semiology is a branch of linguistics. Roland Barthes, through his collection of essays, *Mythologies* (1957), has made a significant contribution in popularising semiotics as an important approach to cultural studies. Widening the scope of semiotics, Barthes, in his book, *Elements of Semiology* (1967), observes: "Semiology aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all these, which form the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment: these constitute, if not languages, at least system of signification" (9). Although the structuralist approach to

semiotics is less popular now in the field of Cultural Studies and Media Studies, yet this does not undermine the importance of the study of semiotics in research.

In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes draws on “the world of wrestling”, “soap powder and detergents”, “the face of Greta Garbo”, “the *Blue Guides to Europe*”, to name a few, to demonstrate the semiotic approach of reading popular culture. It is a treatment that demanded the activities and objects to be read as signs, as a parallel to language system through which meaning is communicated. In a wrestling match, for instance, it is not the result that is Barthes’s concern, rather to look at the meaning of the event. For him, it is a text to be read, which would produce the “exaggerated gestures of wrestlers as a grandiloquent language of what he calls the pure spectacle of excess” (qtd. in Hall and Evans<sup>21</sup>).

In the semiotic approach, along with words and images, objects too function as signifiers in the production of meaning. While the basic function of clothes, according to Barthes, is to cover the body and protect it from weather, they also perform the role of signs. A meaning is constructed that conveys a message. An evening dress may signify “elegance”; a bow tie and tails, “formality”; jeans and trainers, “casual dress”; a certain kind of sweater in the right setting, “a long romantic, autumn walk in the wood” (qtd. in Hall and Evans<sup>22</sup>). Through these signs, clothes convey some meaning and function like language— the language of fashion. While the clothes are the signifiers, the fashion codes of consumer cultures correlating particular clothing combination with concepts like elegance, formality, casualness, romance are the signifieds. Such coding converts the clothes into signs which can then be interpreted as language. Such process of representation depends, for the production of meaning, on two linked operations: the first is the basic code that a particular piece of material is cut and sewn in a particular way (signifier) that fits to our mental concept of it (signified). The combination of both signifier and signified is in Saussurean parlance a sign. Now, having recognised the particular material as a dress or jeans that produces a sign, we move on to a second wider level that links the signs to broader cultural themes, concepts or meanings, for instance, a dress to formality and jeans to casualness. To Barthes, the first is the descriptive level that he calls denotation; and the second he terms connotation. Both, however, are dependent on codes.

While denotation is basic and simple, endorsed by a wider consensus among people regarding the meaning, for example, dress, jeans, etc., the second or the connotative level is a complex one, in which whatever has been decoded at the denotative level using our conventional conceptions regarding dress enters a wider second kind of code, i.e. the language of fashion, which brings in broader themes and meanings associating them with wider semantic fields of our culture like elegance, formality etc. At the second and more complex level, the interpretation involves wider realms of social ideology, like beliefs and value system. This second level of signification has been suggested by Barthes as more “general, global and diffuse . . . It deals with ‘fragments of an ideology . . .’ These signifieds have a very close communication with culture, knowledge, history and

it is through them, so to speak, that the environmental world [of the culture] invades the system [of representation]" (*Mythologies*91-92).

Nevertheless, the major approaches are dependent either on Saussurean model or Peirce's tradition. The celebrated Italian author Umberto Eco tried to bridge the two traditions. Interestingly, Umberto Eco defined semiotics as a branch "concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign"(qtd. in Chandler 7). In fact, semiotics, far from being confined to the study of signs in everyday speech, incorporates anything that can stand for something else. In semiotics, signs can take any form ranging from words and images to sounds, gestures, objects etc. While for the linguist, Saussure, semiology is a science which "studies the role of signs as part of social life", for the philosopher, Charles Peirce, it is the "formal doctrine of signs", closely related to logic (qtd. in Chandler8). Thus, for Peirce, every thought can be a sign. The contemporary approach to semiotics, however, is not to study signs in isolation, rather as an integral part of the semiotic sign system. The focus is on the creation of meanings, which includes not only communication but also the construction and maintenance of reality. In this sense, both semiotics and semantics are closely related as both delve into the meaning of signs. As pointed out by John Sturrock, while semiotics is about the 'how' of signs, semantics is about the 'what' of signs. According to C. W. Morris, semiotics embraces the following branches of linguistics in its fold:"semantics: the relationship of sign to what they stand for; syntactic (or syntax): the formal or structural relations between signs; and pragmatics: the relation of signs to interpreters" (qtd. in Chandler8-9).

Although extensively used in textual analysis, semiotics is far more than simply an analytical tool. The medium of a text may vary from verbal to non-verbal and/or to both. In semiotic parlance, the term text is interpreted as message that has been recorded either as writing or audio or video recording etc. The element of recording makes it free from the sender receiver phenomena. A text, in this sense, becomes an "assemblage of signs (such as words, images, sounds and/or gestures) constructed (and interpreted) with reference to the conventions associated with a genre and in a particular medium of communication" (Chandler 9). The theorists have used the term medium in varied ways to include in its ambit broad categories like speech, writing, print, broadcasting to specific technical forms within the mass media like radio, television, newspapers, magazines, books, photographs, films and records. The circumference also extends to include the medium of interpersonal communication like telephone, letter, fax, e-mail, video conferencing, computer-based chatting etc. Media is also classified on the basis of channels involved such as visual, auditory and tactile. Nonetheless, the multisensory human experience, in terms of representation, is restricted by the medium involved, and each medium, in turn, is curtailed by the channels that it utilizes. Interestingly, even in the most flexible of mediums, language fails in the representation of certain experience like smell and touch. Thus, the frameworks of representation offered by different media and genres are different. In fact, this difference in media led

Emile Benveniste to remark that “we are not able to say ‘the same things’ in systems based on different units in contrast to Hjelmslev, who asserted that in practice, language is a semiotic into which all other semiotics may be translated” (qtd. in Chandler 9).

The frequency as well as fluency of a medium makes it more transparent or invisible to its users. In routine applications, the awareness of a medium tends to lose its effectiveness as a means to an end. A medium tends to fulfil its primary function only when it is transparent. The choice of any particular medium may have influences of which the reader may not always be conscious. The over familiarity with the medium may have an anaesthetic effect on the reader, a possible numbness that leaves the reader with no choices in its use. This might subtly and imperceptibly redefine the reader’s purpose as opposed to the pragmatic or rationalist approach, where the means are meant to suit the reader’s end leaving him/ her in control of the medium.

Harbouring on the growing importance of medium, media theorists have argued that the technical means and systems have overtaken the traditional role of means by ends; a claim that tunes with Marshall McLuhan’s famous aphorism—“the medium is the message” (1967). Some theorists consider media as wholly autonomous entities with specific purposes of their own rather than being merely functional. But the underlying fact that holds good for any medium is that whatever may be the purpose, medium becomes a part of the purpose. In this context, Claude Levi-Strauss has used a term called ‘bricolage’, meaning the creative process. Far from being a calculated choice in terms of adoption of medium that is technically best adapted to a specific purpose, it involves a “dialogue with the materials and means of execution” (qtd in Chandler 10). In such a dialogue, the handy materials offer themselves as more adaptive which might lead to a modification of the original purpose. Such acts of creation are no longer purely instrumental, rather “the bricoleur ‘speaks’ not only with things . . . but also through the medium of things” (Chandler 21). The medium itself becomes expressive. The concept of ‘bricolage’, which was devised by Levi-Strauss for mythical thought, was extended by Chandler to include the use of any medium for any purpose. For instance, writing is shaped not only by the author’s conscious purpose, but also by factors like media involved: language and writing tools, social and psychological processes of mediation etc. Chandler also opines that each and every writer is not a bricoleur, for there are writers who are in complete command of the media they use, as opposed to those who are greatly influenced and shaped by the media they use. It’s more like the media using the writers instead of the writers using the media.

While a text is greatly influenced by the fundamental features of design of different media, we cannot negate the role of socio-cultural and historical factors in shaping how different media are used vis-à-vis their cultural contexts. Many cultural theorists have observed not only the growing popularity of visual media over linguistic media in the contemporary times but also the shifts in their communicative functions. For instance, referring to the popularity of visual

media, Kress and van Leeuwen in *Reading Images* (1996) states, “the dominant visual language is now controlled by the global cultural/technological empires of the mass media, which disseminate the examples set by exemplary designers, and, through the spread of image banks and computer-imaging technology, exert a ‘normalizing’ rather than explicitly ‘normative’ influence on visual communication across the world” (4). Nevertheless, the ever-growing interactions of semiotic structures and languages have led the Russian cultural semiotician, Yuri Lotman, to coin the term ‘semiosphere.’ It refers to “the whole semiotic space of the culture in question” (qtd in Chandler 11). Lotman has derived this concept from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s notion of ‘noosphere’, which means the arena where the mind works. For Lotman, semiosphere is about functioning of language within a culture. But, according to John Hartley, “there is more than one level at which one might identify a semiosphere— at the level of a single national or linguistic culture, for instance, or of a larger unity such as ‘the West’, right up to ‘the species’; we might similarly characterize the semiosphere of a particular historical period” (qtd. in Chandler 11). Such concepts of semiotics offer a more unified and dynamic approach of semiosis instead of its discourse as a specific isolated medium.

### Semiotic Analysis of Advertisement

We come across several advertisements and posters both government and private that use the image of Gandhi and various other objects associated with the life of Gandhi, like his stick, glasses, spinning wheel, slippers etc. that definitely convey some general and at the same time some deeper levels of meanings for the spectator. Here we are studying a few sample advertisements taking the Saussurean model that Barthes applied in understanding the language of fashion. Below are two government advertisements: the first advertisement (Figure 1) for a government programme on cleanliness known as the *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan*, and the second advertisement (Figure 2) for the Khadi and Village Industries Board. While Figure 1 displays the *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan*’s logo of Gandhi’s spectacles, Figure 2 displays a (*charkha*) spinning wheel, a symbol for hand woven clothes that is promoted by the Khadi and Village Industries Board.

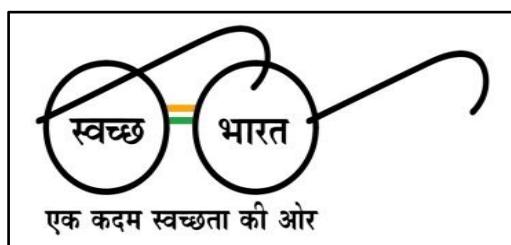


Figure 1. *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan*



Figure 2. Khadi and Village Industries

At the descriptive or denotative level both these advertisements demonstrate or display things that were an essential part of Gandhi's life. Both the specs (glasses) and the *charkha* (spinning wheel) at this stage are mere signifiers. However, at the connotative level or at a deeper level, we realise that they are not simply specs or *charkha* (spinning wheel) that were used by Mahatma Gandhi, rather they conform to a language of ideology, in other words, Gandhi's ideology of cleanliness, self-reliance, non-violence, truth, sacrifice, etc. which convey, in a way, the meaning of all those values that Gandhi stood for. Thus, at the connotative level, we decode deeper meanings that stand as signifieds thereby making the specs (glasses) and the *charkha* (spinning wheel) signs, a bridge between the signifier and the signified. The advertisements in Figure 1 and Figure 2 are Barthesian texts which communicate Levi-Straussian cultural message. As Mahatma Gandhi is the Father of the Indian nation, and as he is highly respected by Indians irrespective of their caste, class, colour, creed, religion and so on, the objects associated with him are 'fetishized'. Mahatma Gandhi had a vision to find sanitation and hygiene in every Indian home. Thus, in Figure 1, his round frame specs (signifier) become the vision of a clean India (signified). Therefore, it seems, Figure 1 becomes the logo of *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan*. Gandhi also believed in self-reliance and also gave thrust to *swadeshi* and village industries. Thus, in Figure 2, the *charkha* (signifier) becomes the instrument to become self-reliant and promote *khadi* and village industries. Thus, Gandhis's spectacles and Charkha are signifiers that have signifieds which are of immense socio-cultural significance. Thus, at the level of signified, in view of these two advertisements, we are transported to a wider and deeper perspective where Gandhi's ideal or idea overshadows the mere objects.

The next two advertisements employ Mahatma Gandhi's image to testify Levi-Strauss' idea of a 'bricolage' (choosing from a diverse range of things), where the medium is not in tune with the original purpose. A look at the advertisements below will give an idea of this: Figure 3 is an advertisement for Tata Steel that deals with building materials, and Figure 4 is an advertisement for Mont Blanc Pen. In these two advertisements, i.e., Figure 3 and Figure 4, there is the growth of value culture around Gandhi's image, which makes it an influential medium

for advertisers to propagate their products. Interestingly, through certain code level associations, Gandhi's image is made to appear as an integral part of the products, irrespective of the fact that there may not be any apparent connection between the two. Yet, the longestablished semiotics of Gandhi's image makes the medium a message, i.e. the medium functions as an end.

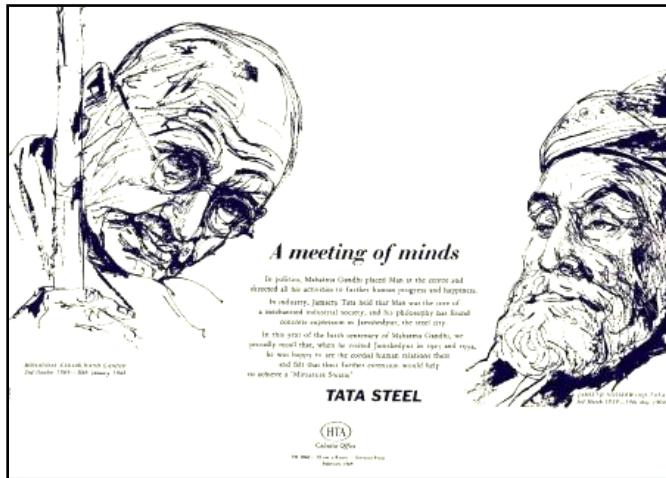


Figure 3. Tata Steel



Figure 4. Mont Blanc

Both the advertisements use similar projections: Gandhi's face along with a tag line. Though apparently the images and the product in Figure 3 and Figure 4 seem to have nothing in common, yet the image and the words partake of a medium that the bricoleur has chosen in both the cases. While making these advertisements, the image designers (bricoleur) have kept in mind Gandhi's life ideals to propagate the objectives of both the companies. In such advertisements, medium becomes an autonomous entity and it serves, in the sense of McLuhan's, more like a message rather than a medium.

Of late, there has been a shift in sign system or what can be called the denaturalizing of sign. The shift in sign system is evident in some of the advertisements that used Gandhi's image. Consider, for instance, the two advertisements below. Figure 5 is an advertisement for Jasmine Hair Oil, Figure 6 is an advertisement for Israeli Craft Beer. Although semiotic codes or conventions regarding Gandhi has been established in the advertising world, yet, the advertisements in Figure 5 and Figure 6 claim that Gandhi's image is not necessarily fixed. The ideology and the value system that have evolved centring Gandhi's image no longer holds good in the world of signs that is constantly shifting. Some advertisements like that in Figure 5 and Figure 6 have broken the stereotype of such projections.



Figure 5. Jasmine Hair Oil



Figure 6. Israeli Craft Beer (Malka Beer)

Such comic representation of Gandhi destabilizes and challenges the already established semiotics relating to Gandhi's image. The signifier, signified and sign relationship that has been explained in the context of representation of Gandhi's image is totally shaken. Such images of Gandhi flaunt any established code or convention of socio-cultural context. The image of Gandhi in the advertisement of Jasmine hair oil (Figure 5) is far removed from any impression that is associated with Gandhian ideology. The image of a man, who has remained bald through the major part of his life, projected in hair oil advertisement is definitely aimed at poking fun. Similarly, in the advertisement of Israeli Craft Beer (Figure 6), Gandhi's image is again tuned with unrelated projections. The image of a man, who has remained vegan and teetotaler almost throughout his life, projected in beer (alcoholic beverage) advertisement is definitely aimed at poking fun and subverting the principles of a legendary human being, who led India to independence with truth, non violence and sacrifice. He considered drinking alcohol as a social evil. While projecting a subtly smiling, bald and grey moustached Gandhi sporting black goggles on the beer bottles, the advertiser hints at Gandhi's experiment with truth and his philosophy of refraining from anything that kills one's soul.

The denaturalizing of signs as evident in the advertisements displayed in Figure 5 and Figure 6 is perhaps because of the complex interplay of subjective factor in the production of semiosis and the culturally shared signification. The world we live in is constituted of signs and, to understand it, we need to invest meaning into it. So, the subjective effect along with the social and historical factors leads to a gradual erosion of Saussurean semiotics. This gradual shift from

structural semiotics has been finely captured by Teresa de Lauretis in the following words:

In the last decade or so, semiotics has undergone a shift of its theoretical gears: a shift away from the classification of sign systems— their basic units, their levels of structural organization— and towards the exploration of the modes of production of signs and meanings, the ways in which systems and codes are used, transformed or transgressed in social practice. While formerly the emphasis was on studying sign systems (language, literature, cinema, architecture, music, etc.), conceived of as mechanisms that generate messages, what is now being examined in the work performed through them. It is this work of activity which constitutes and/ or transforms the codes, at the same time as it constitutes and transforms the individuals using the codes, performing the work; the individuals who are, therefore, the subject of semiosis... Although for Eco meaning production or semiosis is a social activity, he allows that subjective factors are involved in each individual act of semiosis. The notion then might be pertinent to the two main emphases of current, or poststructuralist, semiotic theory. One is a semiotics focused on the subjective aspects of signification and strongly influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis, where meaning is construed as a subject-effect (the subject being an effect of the signifier). The other is a semiotics concerned to stress the social aspect of signification, its practical, aesthetic, or ideological use in interpersonal communication; there, meaning is construed as semantic value produced through culturally shared codes. (qtd. in Chandler 14-15)

The semiotic analysis of advertisements displayed in Figure 5 and Figure 6 helps us understand that meaning is not created objectively. In fact, we partake in the creation of meaning on the basis of codes, which are really difficult to read as these are elusive and obscure. So, the advertisements displayed in Figure 5 and Figure 6 make us realize that even the most realistic signs may not be what they appear, paving way for what may be termed as “denaturalizing” signs (qtd. in Chandler: 15). In the process of deconstructing and contesting established signs, the privileged and suppressed realities come to the fore, perpetuating the construction and maintenance of reality, which itself is a system of signs.

### **Destabilizing Fetish in Post-Capitalist Society**

The irony lies in the fact that the image that has been largely used by the government to propagate government policies or actions so far is now taken over by the corporate world, the market force. Whatever may be the purpose, such projections of Gandhi destabilize the semiotics associated with Gandhian ideology, thereby establishing the fluidity between the signifier and the signified and that the signifier representing Gandhi and his images need not always evoke a positive signified associated with Gandhian ideology. Such comical projections of Gandhi can be likened to the changing attitude of a post-capitalist society towards fetishized objects. Things that were considered fetish, as having a sacred connotation at one point of time, in the wake of Marx's capitalist theory of

commodity being structured by their use-value and exchange-value, have been destabilized as the old value system, which has fissured, is replaced by a new value system. So, it is easier for the post-capitalist society to accept the sacrilegious act against the fetishized objects. In this sense, Gandhi, in Figures 5 and 6, has been turned, by the advertisers, into a fetishized object, whose comical representation is not something that is either profane or unacceptable.

The analyses of the representational techniques of Gandhi vis-a-vis advertisements can be traced to the concept of commodity fetishism, a concept rooted in Marxist thought and specifically central to Frankfurt School philosophy. It was Theodore W. Adorno who claimed that commerce and market has so much invaded the human psyche that psyche itself is shaped by commercial forces. In their famous book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer propounded the theory of cultural industry to demonstrate how human imagination ranging from artistic, spiritual to intellectual activity gets commodified when subordinated to the commercial laws of the market. For the consumer, the cultural goods and services sold in the market promise a richly developed creative individuality. In his book, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), Guy Debord offered the theory of '*le spectacle*' whereby advanced capitalism, mass communication media together with a government exploiting these factors have resulted in a spectacle that transforms human relations to objectified relations among images and vice versa. Advertisement is a strong example of this where the audience passively allows cultural representations of themselves to become the active agents of their beliefs. In such a spectacle, arts and instruments of cultural production are commodified that transforms an aesthetic value to commercial value. Every artistic production or expression is shaped like a commodity that is saleable in the market as artistic goods and services. Considering the perspective of commodity fetishism, the advertisements featuring Gandhiturn him into a sort of artefact that is saleable in the market. The advanced tools of mass communication make it easy to convert Gandhian ideology into a spectacle that has both creative and market value. The whole range of philosophy and ideology associated with Gandhi's life is first turned into a spectacle, in other words a visual signifier conforming to the socio-cultural and historical codes (signifieds) of a time in the past of nation's history, and then colouring and transforming the whole discourse into a sort of fetish. In the capitalistic backdrop, commodity fetishism transforms a cultural commodity (in this case the visual psychological representation of Gandhi) as a product with economic life of its own. In a capitalist economy, every aspect of human concern is treated as a commodity that can be bought and sold in the market. Gandhi's visions, his ideology and his philosophy are camouflaged either by representing him or fragments of his body along with objects he used into a visual product which now comes with a market value.

Jean Baudrillard, falling back on Marx's idea of commodity fetishism, attempted to take into consideration the subjective angle of buyers towards consumer goods. Advertising assigns a kind of mystification, in other words,

turns goods and services into cultural mystique that encourages consumers to purchase products that flatters their construction of cultural identity. In his book, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of Sign* (1972), as an improvement upon Marx's theory of commodity fetishism and the exchange value versus use value dichotomy of capitalism, Baudrillard developed the semiotic theory of sign. In his book, Baudrillard tried to establish how immense transmutation of all values like labour, knowledge, social relations, culture, nature etc. are converted into economic exchange value. Signs and culture are made to appear as if they are enveloped in fetishism, a mystery that is equivalent and contemporaneous with commodity.

Developing the idea of semiotic fetishism, Jean Baudrillard works out a relationship between the social subject and the object, where the object gradually comes to incorporate subject positions, along with ideas and material form. For Baudrillard, the "fetish is the site of a merging or confusion of subject and object and, especially in the later work, the object seems to be primary" (Dant 11). For Baudrillard, the use-value of any commodity, like its exchange-value is a fetishized social relation. The object becomes a commodity, available for exchange only when it is valued in terms of a code of functionality that reflects innate human needs or desires. The object or its thing in terms of use is "nothing but the different types of relations and significations that converge, contradict themselves and twist around it" (qtd. in Dant 11). So, the object of consumption does not have an isolated, asocial existence separated from human needs, rather its existence is determined as a sign in a system of relations of difference with other objects. The process of consumption, as explained by Baudrillard is "not as the realisation of objective needs or of economic exchange but as the social exchange of signs and values" (Dant 11).

In Baudrillardian perspective, objects function as signs in a code of significatory value that can be manipulated within the registers of functionality and ostentation. The same object can be a part of both the registers as useless gadget combines "pure gratuitousness under a cover of functionality, pure waste under a cover of practicality" (qtd. in Dant12). Depending on an object's demonstration of ostentation, a sign value that accrues to the possessor of the object, turns the object itself into a fetish.

In advertising parlance, Gandhian image lend a fetish quality to the objects in terms of signs of reverence and fascination that stand above and beyond simple consumption. The quality of fetish is attested by celebrating certain ritualistic practices (cleanliness, hygiene, non-violence) associated with Gandhian ideology, which in turn revere the object, a class of objects, items from a 'known' producer or even the brand name of a range of products. These ritualistic practices will involve expressing desire for the object and fantasizing about its capacities prior to its consumption. The object itself becomes a sign for these fantasized and desired capacities so that its use or enjoyment can re-stimulate the play of fantasy and desire. (Dant 18)

## Conclusion

This fetish associated with Gandhi and his ideology is palpable not only in advertising, but across mediums that visually project Gandhi both in positive and negative light. From the monumental 1982 biopic "Gandhi" directed by Richard Attenborough, Shyam Benegal directed "The Making of Gandhi" (1996) to the popular portrayal of the Mahatma in Rajkumar Hirani's "Lage Raho Munna Bhai" (2006), the celluloid has projected Gandhi in various shades. From an iconic projection in "Gandhi" to idealising Gandhian values in the contemporary settings by eulogising *Gandhigiri* in "Lage Raho Munna Bhai", filmmakers throughout have had a magnetic attraction towards the different aspects of Gandhi's life and his ideology. Danesh R. Khambata has produced a Broadway-style musical on Gahni's life and works; while a Canadian punk rock band, Propagandhi has created music influenced by Gandhi's politics and his style of rebellion. Gandhi is also projected in a new light in Disney Cartoon channel's animated series titled "BAPU". Visual projection of Gandhi is strongly felt in Jason Quinn's graphic novel *Gandhi: My Life is a Message* wherein the art work is adorned by Sachin Nagar. In these varied projections, as in advertisements, Gandhi is turned into a cultural artefact that carries the saleable stamp with it.

From the study of the advertisements featuring Gandhi or Gandhi's image, it has been found that, in addition to revealing socio-cultural contexts, the texts under study, particularly the texts in Figure 1 and Figure 2, hint at the past and a crucial period of Indian history. Such advertisements do not display Gandhi's image as an isolated existence rather as a continuum in time pointing towards a historicity in socio-cultural context. In this sense, Gandhi or Gandhi's image in advertising text becomes a part of organised social intercourse that cannot exist outside time. Such semiotic approaches of advertisements featuring Gandhi turn advertising into interesting linguistic genre.

Considering the vast gamut of literature on Gandhi, including art works, statues, photographs, advertisements etc. it can be safely said that Gandhi occupies a semiotic space both at the national and international arena. Be it in the print, visual or audio-visual medium, a whole range of semiotics has evolved centring his life and works testifying Lotman's coinage of 'semiosphere'. The multimedia literature on Gandhi can be read as function of languages within culture. Furthermore, the frequent use of Gandhi as an image along with the objects he used in the advertising texts has produced a semiotic culture in itself. Apart from government departments and government policies, Gandhi's image now endorses a variety of products globally. A strong medium in itself, Gandhi's image, in the world of advertisements, has both a national and international appeal. The image automatically draws into the audience's consciousness, a set of codes spanning an era of socio-cultural, political and historical events associated with India's struggle for independence. Thus, there is the growth of value culture around Gandhi's image, which makes it an influential medium for advertisers to propagate their products. It is noticed in the advertising texts, say the texts in Figure 3 and Figure 4, how Gandhi's image has been made to associate with

products that have no apparent connections. Thus, in such advertisements, the long-established semiotics of Gandhi's image makes the medium a message.

The study reveals that in post-capitalist set up, Gandhi and his ideology, through strong visual medium of advertisements, have been converted into artefacts that have economic value of their own, artefacts that can be sold and bought in the market. By ascribing commodity status and saleable status, advertisements have turned Gandhi into a cultural and commodity fetish. However, in post-capitalist society, with the change in the value system, such fetish objects are frequently desecrated. Further, the semiotic analyses of the advertisements featuring Mahatma Gandhi, particularly advertising texts in Figure 5, and Figure 6 have proved the fluid nature of sign system built around Gandhi's image.

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## REVISITING GENDER NARRATIVES : A CRITICAL STUDY OF NEE DEVI'S SHORT STORIES

**Gurumayum Deepika**

### Abstract

Starting from *Nupi Lan* (Women's War) in 1904, women have been forerunners of social movements against oppressive regimes in Manipur. In comparison to North Indian Hindu societies, *Meitei* women has been perceived as having relatively more freedom, and are often seen at par with men socially, culturally, politically and economically. However, their lived realities tell a different story. In this context, the paper would attempt a critique of the narrative of the *Nupi Keithel*, the women only market of Manipur, as a symbol of economic freedom of its women. An alternative reading finds the space as one where patriarchal gender norms and social hierarchies are prevalent, rather than being an exclusive space for Manipuri women as endorsed by popular narratives. This concept of gendered spaces is found adequately represented in many of the literary works by women writers from Manipur, of which two short fictions by Nee Devi are examined here. Nee Devi's writings focus on the representation of trauma and hardships faced by marginalized women in Manipur. Women's sexuality and critiques of traditional morality, themes rarely discussed earlier in Manipuri literature, also find expression in her works.

**Keywords :** Nee Devi, Manipuri Women's Writing, *Meitei*, *Nupi Keithel*, Gendered Space

### Introduction

“*Shiba Ngamdaduna Hinglibashingda*”<sup>1</sup> —the dedication to Nee Devi’s latest anthology of short stories in Manipuri reads “for those who are living only because they are unable to die” (Devi). When her first work *Kadaidano* (novel) was published in 1987, Nee Devi was barely twenty. Her other published works include the novel *Cheithengfam* (1988), a poetry volume *Chakngai Warisida* (1995), and two anthologies of short stories *Shollaba Maree* (2002) and *Lei Manaa Amatang* (2009).

Women’s writing in Manipur emerged very late owing to their late access to formal education which came only in 1935 (Nahakpam 24). Though there are a few women who wrote in journals as early as 1931, the year 1965 is “popularly

regarded as the emerging point for women writers" in Manipur with the publication of Thoibi Devi's novel *Radha*, and Binodini's anthology of short stories, *Nunggairakta Chandramukhi* (27). Khaidem Pramodini along with Thoibi and Binodini, belong to the first generation of women writers in Manipur (24). While the "pioneers" (24) veered towards the search for the ideal woman, it was the "second generation" (30) of women writers who first began to explore the image of the new, educated, middle-class women "negotiating with the boundaries of traditional patriarchal society...." (31). Different from the conservative trends observed in the preceding generations, the "third generation" (38) writers became more vocal about issues such as women's rights and gender equality:

Raising their voices against restrictive and gender-biased customs, they began to explore new ideas such as women's rights, equality between genders, and so on. . . along with related social norms—such as the loss of women's individuality within a marital bond, the sexuality of women, and the relationships of transgender/non-binary individuals. (Nahakpam 40)

Nee Devi belongs to the "third generation" (Nahakpam 38) of Manipuri women writers who identify with a "new awareness of women's condition in Manipuri society and the attempt to delineate a new place for women outside the subjugation of patriarchal, traditional and religious moulds" (38) while reflecting these new sensibilities in their writings. This paper attempts to examine the literary representations of women in Nee Devi's short stories through the concept of gendered spaces. In this context, a theorization on Manipur's famous women's market, the *Nupi Keithel*<sup>2</sup>, becomes pertinent.

### **Gendered Space and *Nupi Keithel***

From the 1904 British attempt to reintroduce a system of forced labour, women have been forerunners of social movements against oppressive regimes in Manipur. Following another upheaval in 1939 which was also led by women, the two uprisings came to be known as the 1<sup>st</sup> Nupi Lan and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Nupi Lan, respectively. A more recent development could be observed in the significant role played by *Meitei* women between 1972 and 1980 in the form of the *Nisabandh* or prohibitionists, which gradually evolved into the present day *Meira Paibi* movement (Kshetri 29). In comparison with women in North Indian Brahmanical societies, *Meitei*<sup>3</sup> women have thus been perceived as having relatively more freedom, oftentimes at par with men—socially, culturally, politically, and economically.

The centrality of patriarchal values and strict conformity to the patriarchal codes—"the Leimarel code<sup>4</sup> and the Emoinu code<sup>5</sup>," (Chungkham 34) ensnared with the remnants of a powerful ancient matriarchy (Arambam 11), and a still evolving aftermath of the seventeenth century Sanskritization, however results in a paradox which is complex and multi-layered. A closer observation thus points to lived realities that reveal contradictions and paradoxes, thereby necessitating a

re-reading of the popular and culturally-endorsed narratives about women in a patriarchal *Meitei* society, and a critique of simplified and simplistic understanding of cultural symbols such as the *Nupi Keithel* (Women's Market).

The concept of space as not-so-neutral but rather highly gendered is central to understanding the power dynamics that operate within all patriarchal systems. For instance, the division of space as *polis* and *oikos* in ancient Greece with the former accorded to men and the latter to women, clearly delineates one space as belonging to a particular gender. In her book *Space, Place, and Gender* (1994), Doreen Massey foregrounds this politics of gendered spaces:

From the symbolic meaning of spaces/places and the clearly gendered messages which they transmit, to straightforward exclusion by violence, spaces and places are not only themselves gendered but, in their being so, they both reflect and affect the ways in which gender is constructed and understood. (179)

Thus, Massey reinforces the importance given to not only what Lefebvre termed the “geometry” of space but also its lived practices and the symbolic meaning” (Massey, Politics 251). In the Indian context, the discourse on space has conformed to a similar paradigm where public and private spaces are problematically identified with male and female genders respectively. Therefore, it becomes important to look at spaces as more than just locational concepts. As McFadden emphasizes, “space is gendered and highly politicised” (McFadden):

certain spaces have been culturally, religiously and politically marked as either ‘male’ or ‘female,’.... The spaces we refer to as public are assumed to be male, and for centuries men have excluded women from the public where all the key decisions relating to power are deliberated and implemented. (McFadden)

The *Nupi Keithel* is known all over the world as being the only market in the world run entirely by women, and has often been seen as a symbol of the economic freedom enjoyed by *Meitei* women. In other words, Manipur’s *Nupi Keithel* is a unique manifestation of a gender dynamic that departs from traditional gender norms practiced in other Indian societies as women have access to the public space, enjoy mobility and visibility, and are active participants in trading and commercial activities. The market came into existence around the 16<sup>th</sup> Century as a consequence of the *Lallup* system, a form of forced military service under the monarchy (Kshetri 25). According to this system, adult males had to be in service for ten out of every forty days. Therefore, in the absence of the men, women had to take charge of their homes and economic affairs (25).

An attempt to comprehend the underlying politics of the space leads to new questions that challenges this narrative of economic freedom of *Meitei* women. The contestations range from administrative control to the presence of class and ethnic hierarchies among the women. Though *Nupi Keithel* has only women vendors, it cannot be claimed to be independently operated by them since its

administration (including the licensing system) involves the Imphal Municipal Corporation, which keeps its functioning far from being managed entirely by women. Additionally, an understanding that the *Nupi Keithel* originated out of necessity in the absence of men which compelled women to step out of their homes to earn a livelihood, and not as a manifestation of an equal society, also undo this myth of ‘freedom.’ As Kshetri comments, “economic necessity forced them to come out from home with their products for sale in the small market of their localities....these markets developed into women’s market in every nook and corner of Manipur valley” (25). The myth<sup>6</sup> associated with the origin of the market—of women as mediums to bring peace and a common culture, is also problematic as pointed out by critics: “Women’s role is very much specified as a carrier of culture and peacemaker, again a patriarchal construct where woman has no power over herself. . . . The power and control are still manipulated by the male authority” (Chungkham 36). Moreover, a recent observation has been the presence of male vendors in this ‘female’ space that has led to a dilution of the traditional definition of the *Nupi Keithel* (Manipur Govt Bans Male Vendors). This visible presence of males in the ‘female’ space, combined with its invisibility in the form of dominant patriarchal norms, along with historical and cultural connotations, are instrumental in the creation of the gendered politics of the *Nupi Keithel*, making it a space which does not function entirely outside patriarchal bounds.

A more challenging issue with regard to the *Nupi Keithel*, the symbol of economic ‘freedom’ of Manipuri women, is that of the homogenization of women belonging to different communities and ethnicities within this space by looking at them from a majoritarian lens. The practice of stalls being passed down from mothers-in-law to daughters-in-law could perhaps be a reason for the space being dominated mostly by middle class *Meitei* women who hold the license. Thus, despite being identified as a collective female space, the fissures within and their ensuing politics cannot be ignored. The women in the *Nupi Keithel* are divided along lines of class evident from the division among the women themselves as licensed vendors who are allotted a seat inside the building of the market, and unlicensed street vendors who do not enjoy the privileges of ‘informal inheritance.’ There have time and again been protests demanding an equal space which is denied to them, ironically by women (Roadside Vendors Associations). Soyam Lokendrajit’s critique<sup>7</sup> of the conflation of visibility in public spaces with freedom is relevant here:

The proposition that women enjoy economic freedom in a society that itself does not have economic freedom defies the logic of social sciences. Toiling to make ends meet and yet silenced in the name of tradition—it is exploitation of the highest order that only looks like freedom. (54)

Based on the above premises, it would indeed be naive to see the *Nupi Keithel* as an exclusive female space and a symbol of economic freedom of Manipuri women. The divisions among the women themselves lead to a hierarchy which is not so openly acknowledged. The market has licensed women vendors

occupying their spaces, but there are also unlicensed women vendors who are deprived of access to these spaces, ironically by other women. In addition, there are street women whose presence in the further margins of the *Nupi Keithel* are omitted, and are excluded entirely from this ‘female’ space. These women are among the most vulnerable sections in a society deeply entrenched in patriarchal codes, and are more than doubly marginalized. While many are forced to enter sex work, others resort to hawking cheap items on the roadside. There are women who become part of the *Nupi Keithel*, such as the madwoman Indrani, as well as those who stand in its margins like Leibaaklei, both protagonists in Nee Devi’s works.

### ***Nupi Keithel* in Nee Devi’s Short Stories**

Nee Devi’s writings explore realistic representations of women in the *Meitei* society and their silent sufferings. She depicts the struggles of women, particularly those of socially ostracized and marginalized women—the discarded women, widows, madwomen, and women disowned by their families. Her works poignantly capture the trauma, difficulties and hardships faced by women in a conservative *Meitei* society. Nee Devi’s short fictions also question patriarchal society’s association of traditional morality and honour solely with women. More importantly, her writings boldly reflect on the question of women’s sexuality, a theme not often addressed in works of Manipuri literature.

The short story “Ashibagee Macha Ashiba” [Dead Offspring of the Dead] is part of *Lei Manaa Amatang* [A Petal of Flower], a collection of fifteen short stories published in 2009, which also won the Katha Award. It recounts the story of Indrani, a madwoman and widow, who does odd jobs and runs errands for the women vendors in *Nupi Keithel*. Unlike other madwomen, she keeps herself tidy and does not have an unkempt appearance. While alive, her husband had brought home a second wife which tremendously affected Indrani, and it is his sudden death that ultimately causes her madness (Devi92). Years after her husband’s death, she reveals to the women around her that he has come back, and expresses her happiness. They play along as she shares her stories with some even pestering her for more details:

What all did you talk about? When did he come? Yesterday? Or was it the day before? . . . . But did you really talk to him? . . . . You should’ve asked him where he was all this while. (88)

Not too long after, news of Indrani’s pregnancy shocks everyone causing widespread scorn and contempt for her. She is ridiculed and mocked at by those in the market calling out to her, “Indrani, who is the lucky father?” (93). Indrani disappears for months after this incident and it is only towards the end that she reappears, dishevelled and completely devastated. As she tells everyone, her child was stillborn and “they flung it into the river, calling it dead” (94). At the end of the short story, she walks away sobbing and talking to herself as the women remain staring at her.

In the short story, the *Nupi Keithel* becomes the site of humiliation of a woman by other women. Nee Devi raises questions of traditional morality in relation to Indrani, the madwoman protagonist whose husband is long dead and is chided for having sexual desires— “This’ madwoman is a flirt, she’s certainly going to end up with a bastard child, god knows which madwoman takes so much fancy to looks...!” (Devi91). The writer goes beyond the private to locate Indrani only in public spaces—bus parkings and crowded market places in and around the *Nupi Keithel*. Though she is not involved in any economic activities, she becomes a part of the space, spending all her time there and running errands for the women vendors. In the short story, society takes the liberty to assume that Indrani is devoid of sexuality because she is a ‘madwoman’. The writer’s protest against Indrani’s humiliation by both men and women in the middle of the *Nupi Keithel* is seen in her calling them “god-like people who have never committed any wrong in their lives and will never do so” (93).

The story therefore is the writer’s critique of a society that fails to hold perpetrators of violence responsible while wrongly blaming the victim. It also questions a patriarchal *Meitei* society that refuses to accept women as individuals with emotions and desires, and only sees them as sacrificing wives and mothers or the chaste widow. Nee Devi questions how women like Indrani are stripped off of humanity and sexuality by the patriarchal society which judges women through its skewed moral codes. The short story also highlights the glaring presence of women as agent perpetrators of patriarchy within the space of *Nupi Keithel*, undoing the narrative of an impenetrable female space. The writer thus comments on how the physical invisibility of men in the female space does not necessarily point to its absence. Rather, patriarchy is manifested within the space in its presence as oppressive norms, as is evident in the case of Indrani:

Some look at her and chant god’s name, while some spit at her in disgust.  
Everyone began to distance themselves from Indrani. Nobody sends her to run errands like before, none allowing her to come close, or indulge in playful banter with her. (92)

Indrani is humiliated by the women in the place which she had considered herself a part of. The writer’s rejection of society’s different moral yardsticks for men and women is expressed by a woman in the short story— “You dogs! Do women get pregnant without men?!” (93), which is a powerful assertion through which the writer questions society and more specifically, women for their complicity in enabling the oppression of other women. She chides society for blaming only women, while ignoring the men who victimize them, and the system that enables such oppressions. Indrani ultimately is left out from everywhere because she is a madwoman and ‘immoral’—she is driven away from her home and excluded from the female space. A most poignant example of a socially marginalized woman, Indrani disappears, victimized by patriarchal gender norms and its skewed moral codes. She is ostracized by the market women, and the *Nupi Keithel* which was earlier a space for sisterhood metamorphoses into a site of her exclusion and ostracism.

Nee Devi depicts Indrani not just as a ‘madwoman’ but also as a woman of flesh and blood who has emotions and desires like other women. For the society, Indrani wandering around the market is acceptable and appropriate. She is treated with sympathy, if not love, by the women in the *Nupi Keithel*, and is wholeheartedly accepted as one of their own. However, they immediately abandon Indrani as they come to learn of her pregnancy. There are no questions asked and no explanations sought from her. The women in the market and society as a whole assumes that she has committed an act of transgression by having sexual relations with a man. For them, Indrani despite her madness, transgresses the boundary set by a patriarchal society, and is therefore to be punished.

The writer’s scathing critique of the society arises from the ambiguous nature of Indrani’s ‘transgression.’ Indrani thinks that it is her dead husband who came back, and she continues to engage with him perhaps mistakenly encouraged by the women who delighted in her stories. On the other hand, the women turn a deaf ear to her stories and continue to do so until they hear of her pregnancy. In the story, they make no attempt to find out the truth, nor do they try to comfort Indrani who until recently was one of their own. Not for once do they consider Indrani as a victim of sexual violence by a man who took advantage of her condition and made her believe that he was her dead husband. There is no anger directed at the man who “came only when it’s dark” (88) and he is left untouched—it is the madwoman who bears the brunt of traditional morality codes, leading to her repeated victimization.

Nee Devi in this short story deconstructs the idealised representation of the *Nupi Keithel* in popular narratives as symbolic of women’s economic freedom in Manipur through her depiction of Indrani’s social ostracism and humiliation within the ‘female’ space. Besides the representation of women vendors as active participants in trade and commerce and the *Nupi Keithel* as a space representative of the empowerment of Manipuri women, Nee Devi in locating a madwoman in the centre of the *Nupi Keithel* and her narrative questions the existing narrative. Subsequently, it is in Indrani’s humiliation that Nee Devi highlights the prevalent gender norms of the *Meitei* society which is represented in the microcosm of the *Nupi Keithel*. The writer in the short story thus highlights the undercurrent of the politics—of gender, class, and traditional morality, of the cultural monolith that *Nupi Keithel* is.

In other works, Nee Devi’s female protagonists confront patriarchal scrutiny in their quest of a livelihood and forage beyond the ideal, submissive woman. As she explains, her characters are not restricted to portraying the ‘ideal’ women (Devi 292). It is perhaps in line with this that many of her female characters exhibit grit and challenge of the oppressive norms of a deeply unequal society.

Nee Devi’s short fiction “Leibaaklei” is from her anthology of short stories *Shollaba Maree* [Frail Relations] which was first published in 2002. It tells the

story of a woman Leibaaklei who struggles to make ends meet for her family of five, while also facing her husband's taunts about her ways of earning. Leibaaklei collects leftover rice from rice mills and also goes around collecting food waste from the locality to feed their pig. She goes to the market to earn a livelihood, and takes care of all household chores alone. Her bedridden husband continues to judge her even as she alone suffers to run the house. Leibaaklei unlike other *Meitei* women does not even go to her parents' home to celebrate the annual festival of *Ningol Chakouba*<sup>8</sup>, as her only resolve is to earn money to feed her family. As she stands in front of the movie theatre selling tickets, the police suddenly appear and she along with some other women are taken away to the police station.

In this short story, the character Leibaaklei is someone whom society labels as a *kaalaa bazar toubi*—a derogatory and demeaning term for women hawkers who stand on the busy streets, a “fallen” woman. Women like her exist in the margins with no designated place within the previously discussed female space. With no help from her husband who is rendered disabled, she does odd jobs and singlehandedly runs a household of five. She goes to the market to earn a livelihood and resells cinema tickets in an effort to make ends meet. Though he in no way contributes to the household, her husband Lukhoi is quick to judge Leibaaklei for what he and the society sees as not so respectable a means of earning a livelihood—“From the day Leibaaklei stood on the roadside to sell movie tickets, all her efforts became sinful indulgence in her husband's eyes, her sweat and blood turned poisonous, and everything she did began to be deceitful” (Nee, Leibaaklei46). The question of honour, and patriarchal constructs of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ women is dealt with sharp criticism by Nee Devi in the short story.

The writer locates Leibaaklei in public spaces like Indrani, but interestingly, Leibaaklei is not entirely part of and welcome in the female space of the *Nupi Keithel*. She literally stands in the margins, on the road—an open and vulnerable space for marginalized women like her in a gendered, patriarchal society. Towards the end of the story, the police take her away along with some others—“Leibaaklei was also among the ones herded onto the police car” (48). Unlike the ostracism of Indrani from the ‘female’ space, Leibaaklei is never considered a part of that space from the beginning. She does not own a shed with a license, nor does she attempt to make herself a part of it. On the other hand, she stands and moves around the margins of the *Nupi Keithel* trying to earn a livelihood. Leibaaklei is not only excluded from this space, but her presence is totally omitted—it is as if she does not exist at all.

Already excluded from the *Nupi Keithel*, she is further victimized by the police action. Nee Devi reflects on the cruel circumstances that women like Leibaaklei have to face at every juncture of their lives. The short story highlights the plight of marginalized women victimized by a patriarchal ideology in the public as well as the private. Leibaaklei discards social acceptance and is no more bothered by its judgements in her struggle to survive and feed her children. Her husband Lukhoi, on the other hand, thinks that she ‘enjoys’ her work so much

that she cannot even wait for daybreak to set out, even going to the extent of calling it an “addiction” (47). His disability which makes him unable to contribute anything for the family, coupled with an “inferiority complex” (45) makes him question his wife’s morals. He forgets that it is Leibaaklei who is the sole breadwinner and she struggles to earn as well as take care of the house. Lukhoi’s character can thus be read as symbolic of an ailing patriarchy, one ever to judge and preach, while not offering any respite to the sufferings and difficulties.

Nee Devi in the short story tells the story of Leibaaklei and her struggles for livelihood in the margins of the *Nupi Keithel*. In doing so, she sheds light on a previously unseen side of the *Nupi Keithel* and its politics of exclusion. Unlike the women vendors who are part of the space of the *Nupi Keithel*, Leibaaklei is depicted as far distanced from it and can only move around the margins of the *Nupi Keithel*. In a sense, her exclusion from the representative ‘female’ space is a form of victimization meted out by the women in the *Nupi Keithel* who judge her like her husband. This could be ascribed to her mobility being associated with being a morally loose woman as reinforced by ideals of traditional morality. As much as Nee Devi critiques the women of the *Nupi Keithel* as upholders of patriarchal moral and social codes, she also highlights the space as being exclusive at more than one level—gender and class. Leibaaklei’s exclusion from the space is enabled by the women who collectively represent the *Nupi Keithel*, who follow unspoken rules of ostracism and marginalization of women like Leibaaklei and Indrani. Thus, she is rendered vulnerable and has no place within the ‘female’ space. As in the case of Indrani, Leibaaklei’s location in relation to the *Nupi Keithel* is symbolic of her position within a patriarchal *Meitei* society.

Thus, we see these women who literally as well as metaphorically stand on the margins. Both Indrani and Leibaaklei are excluded from the ‘female’ space of the *Nupi Keithel*, and are subjected to discrimination and judgement grounded on patriarchal moral codes. Their location in and around the female space, in no way offers them any respite from discrimination and ostracism. Nee Devi thus highlights the issue of women being active participants in subjecting less-privileged women to discrimination and humiliation. Through her two protagonists, she decries the patriarchal norms of *Meitei* society that holds only women culpable while overlooking the role of men as perpetrators of violence and injustices. As the writer herself says, “men are also involved, it is not only the women who are at fault” (Devi 292). Therefore, the concept of space in a patriarchal society needs to be understood in terms of more than just physical and geographical locations. Far from being neutral, spaces are rather highly gendered as well as politicised in patriarchal societies, as in the case of Manipur’s *Nupi Keithel*.

## Conclusion

The understanding of *Nupi Keithel* as a site within which complex politics of gender, class, and marginalization intersects, rather than looking at it

simplistically as a symbol of economic freedom enjoyed by Manipuri women, is vital to a more inclusive discourse on gender in the context of Manipur. Though a certain degree of agency and ‘freedom’ is manifested in their mobility, access to public spaces and roles as leaders, as well as in their abilities to make choices to some extent, it does not, in any way, come close to a question of feminist autonomy.

Nee Devi reflects these complexities vis-à-vis women in the *Meitei* society in her literary representations. Though there is no radical subversion of patriarchal stereotypes, her works question traditional morality and the burden it places solely on women as its upholders. Her writings also critique the patriarchal polarization of the ‘ideal’ woman who is shy, docile, submissive and oppressed, and the non-conforming ‘bad’ woman. The writer recognizes the lived realities of marginalized women in a male-dominated *Meitei* society, and therefore writes about their experiences, questioning deep-rooted patriarchal values in the process. Nee Devi in her writings builds up a feminist resistance if not outright rebellion.

### **Notes :**

- 1 Nee Devi writes in *Meeteilon*, the language spoken by the *Meiteis* of Manipur.
- 2 *Nupi Keithel* is the women only market in Manipur, probably the only of its kind all over the world. It comprises of different buildings that sell different items ranging from clothes to ritual offerings. It is also known as the *Ima* Market or Mother’s Market.
- 3 *Meitei* is the major community that inhabits the Manipur valley. They are also termed as *Meetei*.
- 4 Leimarel is the Supreme Mother Goddess of the Meiteis. According to the creation myth of the Meiteis, the Supreme Father wanted his son, Sanamahi, to become the king of gods. But the ancient supreme mother goddess plotted against him and made the younger son Pakhangba the king. As a punishment, the supreme mother goddess had to serve as a slave/wife to Sanamahi who became the king of the household and was worshipped as a house god. Thus, according to Chungkham, the Leimarel code stands for the female principle being subsumed into the male principle and of sons dominating over the power of the Mother.
- 5 Emoinu is the Goddess of the household, and symbolizes the patriarchal moral code that justifies and consolidates the location of the ‘good’ woman inside the house. She is the representative figure of the ideal Meitei woman whose main role, according to Chungkham, is that of housekeeping and motherhood. She further likens it to Victorian codes, calling them “more moralizing than practical.” Chungkham is of the opinion that though the object of such a moral code is intended to nurture an ideal woman and an ideal man, its hierarchical and patriarchal nature inevitably breeds an uncontrollable male dominance.
- 6 Oral sources tell of bloody battles between the gods and humans, or among different clans. The goddesses were asked to sell things for both groups and to

arrange a feast. The warring groups were then made to eat a common dish, symbolically binding them in a bond of brotherhood.

- <sup>7</sup> Soyam Lokendrajit's critique is premised on the assumption that Manipur has a dependent economy.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ningol Chakouba* is one of the most important festivals of the *Meiteis*. On this day, married women visit their parental homes for a meal and gifts are exchanged.

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## REVISITING BHADRALOK: “DANGORIYA” AS THE TERM FOR ASSAMESE MASCULINITY

**Parikshit Sarmah**

### Abstract

This paper tries to focus on the construction of the image of a “masculine Assamese man” and how that concept of Assamese masculinity carries unique features from already established masculinity research. The paper tries to study how Assamese masculinity is understood not only in oppositional cognations of men vis-à-vis women but as men vis-à-vis other men, men’s role for society and his respectful position. The respected social status of a man in Assamese society derives from different qualities including class, caste and economic status; such factors play an important part in shaping ideas about the male gender in the society. Assamese masculinity (the image of masculinity among the Assamese speaking community) is based on the images of the *Ideal Assamese Man* created by the cultural institutions of media, folklore, and literature which are shaped by patriarchy. This is perhaps the reason why we require a term which is more indigenous, more rooted in folk and traditional Assamese life to discuss Assamese masculinity. This study, therefore, tries to emphasize how the term *dangoriya* is more apt in terms of discussing Assamese masculine identity. Accordingly, the objective of this study is to establish both how the already established term *bhadralok* does not properly justify Assamese masculinity and to show how the word *dangoriya* more aptly conveys the sense of the same.

**Keywords :** Assamese, Masculine Identity, Modernity, *Dangoriya*, *Lakshminath Bezbaroa*

Masculinity is a set of attributes, behaviours and roles; it is not based on a single norm and that is why it we prefer to talk about masculinities instead of masculinity. Masculine considerations do not marginalize or ignore the physical aspects of sex and gender altogether, but the focus of masculine theory and research is the cultural, social and political aspects of gender - the construction, reception, performance, attitudes and thoughts surrounding the male gender. For Connell, “hegemonic masculinity is defined as the current configuration of practice that legitimizes men’s dominant position in society and justifies the subordination of women, and other marginalized ways of being a man” (Connell 186).

This paper tries to focus on the construction of the image of a “masculine Assamese man” and how that concept of Assamese masculinity carries unique features from already established masculinity research of India. The paper tries to study how Assamese masculinity is understood not only in oppositional cognitions of men vis-à-vis women but as men vis-à-vis other men, men’s role in the quest for the Assamese nation which is not dependent on other and also the importance of an Assamese identity based on its fight against a real and imaginary enemy. The respected social status of a man in Assamese society derives from different qualities including class, caste and economic status; such factors play an important part in shaping ideas about the male gender in the society, these qualities invites our attention to a particular term *Dangoriya* to find a suitable term for masculinity studies in Assam. The researcher is aware of the raging ongoing debate about who is an Assamese; there are still serious differences about whether Assamese identity should be linguistically or geographically defined. The researcher is also aware of the multiple ethnicities that constitute the state. However, in this study, I propose to use the term ‘Assamese’ in its geographical sense (all the people living inside the geographical boundary of Assam) and all-inclusive sense to refer to the dominant cultural codes regarding masculinity. The researcher is also aware of the linguistic diversity of the state and different shape of Assamese nationalism and sub-nationalism but based on the available literature on the formation of a ‘modern Assamese nation’, throughout the paper, the researcher uses the term ‘Assamese’ to define those people who live within the geographical boundary of Assam and speak or understand the Assamese language.

This paper focuses on basically two aspects; firstly it encompasses why masculinity research of Assam demands a term that reflects the unique traits of Assamese man. Secondly, this paper focuses on how the particular word *dangoriya* reflects some of the larger questions like acceptance of influx of Western modernity by Assamese people during the pre-independence 19th century Assam and the question of Assamese nationalism. Another word *bhadralok* has already gained wide currency amongst masculinity scholars with reference to Bengali identity, the word *bhadralok* also figures in the Assamese vocabulary; so, it is also noteworthy to look at how the use of the word *bhadralok* as the reference of Assamese masculinity is susceptible to misinterpretation. In Assamese vocabulary, *bhadralok* is considered as a third-person term, but *dangoriya* may be used for both third person and second person.

This paper projects *dangoriya* as a subjective analytical category that faces mainly two obstacles. Firstly, it is rooted in the understanding of a social group and disagreement may arise among different individuals who may use it for different social experiences, so, the paper focuses on the early writings of modern Assamese literature. Furthermore, the exact figure of *dangoriya* cannot be evoked as it does not represent any particular category like education or profession (which is very much significant in terms of *bhadralok*). (J.H.

Broomfield has calculated the *bhadralok* population as between 3 to 4 percent in 1900) (Bromfield 13).

The term *dangoriya* has been there in Assamese society from Ahom kingdom<sup>1</sup> as a term assigned to level officers of the state, as an honorable term assigned to the three ministers of Ahom regime- Burhagohain, Borgohain, Borpatra Gohain. What I find interesting in the term *dangoriya* is its dynamic nature in different contexts. Such dynamic term more aptly conveys the multiple natures of masculinities. From ghost lore in a rural platform to English educated Assamese people; from a modern-day political and social formal gathering to the language of public speech of political leaders in Bodoland Territorial Council Election 2020, *dangoriya* conveys multiple meanings in Assamese society.

The term is derived from the word *dangor*, which carries connotations such as *manyobyokti* (a nobleman; a respectable man), *Manyolok*, *bixistobyokti*, *shrestha lok* (Honoured gentleman), *borlok* (a respectable man, a nobleman, a grandee) (Barua 441). A *dangoriya*, according to the Assamese dictionary Hemkosh, is expected to be *shrestha* (best), *manyo* (respectable) (Chaliha), *bixisto* (honoured), *jestha* (elder) (Barua 441). This term cannot be regarded as a direct translation to English Gentlemen like *bhadralok* in Bengali masculinity.

Assamese identity politics has been trapped in the world of appearances, migration, language and cultural thread of being exploited by the outsider from its neighboring states and countries including Bengal. Different political events like the Assam Movement, the rise and fall in popularity of the ULFA, implementation of AFSPA, Secret Killings, the rise of regional parties like the Asom Gana Parishad and the perceived threat of Bangladeshi immigrants have shaped and transformed the image of 'Assamese masculine man' to figures like war hero Lachit<sup>2</sup> and Chilarai<sup>3</sup>. In such circumstances, it is important to find out a contextualised and already established term to denote desired masculine attributes of Assam and masculinity studies of the state. In this regard, reminding the vast *bhadralok* literature of masculinity studies in India, it is important to cross-check how the term *bhadralok* does not properly justify Assamese masculinity and *dangoriya* more aptly conveys the sense of the same.

As a term *dangoriya* is highly rooted in Assamese traditional life as a respected category which appeals to the noteworthiness of it in projecting the respected Assamese man. As in contemporary Bengal society, only the *bhadralok* mythology remains which work for status for the educated Bengali Middle Class (Ghosh 4). This is tricky in the case of Assam; the second half of the twentieth century in Assam's history is full of chaos and political demands. Such history has changed the concept of a real respected man from the "English educated, social reformer, intellectual" to "the real son of the motherland", *dangoriya* remained respected side by side in both cases. The social, religious and cultural renaissance of Bengal and Assam that established the status group *bhadralok* remained severely limited within the English-educated community (Ghosh 3) is not a question for the present Assam where the quest for identity and "son of the soil"

discourse controls the lion's share of social order. The symbol of masculinity for Assam interpolated by cultural, historical and geographical location-related factors reflects Assamese masculinity as more folklore rooted and in the rural context. Besides, being an "ideal man" in the political unrest Assam from the 1980's demands a sacrifice of man for the "Mother Assam"; A manliness of sacrifice and protector which is based on the concept of "us versus the other".

Assamese nationalistic elites take the lion's share of the respectful status of Assamese man in post-independence Assam.

Different political movements of Assam distinctively shaped Assamese masculinity with the help of nationalism, with the nation fighting real and imaginary enemies; attributes of masculinity can be seen in the respective discourses that have emanated from each of these movements. This group of people has been glorified with different terms like *luitopriya deka* (brave boys from the bank of Luit), *notun purux* (new age man), *lachitar senani* (Soldiers of Lachit) and many more. But, as *dangoriya* shares the same position in every circumstance of Assamese social life, it will be more suitable to consider it among all other terms. The projection of Lachit Borphukan as the new symbol of Assamese masculinity during the second phase of the twentieth-century appeals to our heed to the importance of Assamese nationalism in projecting respected Assamese man. By the 1970s and 1980s, this new class had raised the demand of cultural identity which had no link with the *bhadralok* or *babu* identity but re-created new-age *dangoriya* group commonly mentioned as *notun purux* (new age man) or *deka Shakti* (power of young).

Considering all these qualities and attributes of *dangoriya*, it is important to study the differences with the Bengali *bhadralok*. Primal Ghosh hints at how the category of the *bhadra* and non-*bhadra* or *choto* do not operate in other parts of India and is very much a Bengali phenomenon (Ghosh 22); but, some of the Assamese literature reflects the availability of *bhadralok*- *etor* or *chotolok* in Assam during 19th century even though *dangoriya* was used to denote a respectable man. We can find such examples in "Miri Jiyori" by Rajanikanta Bordoloi, the first Assamese novel published in 1894, (Bordoloi 9-13). But, such mentions are not adequate to establish the proper establishment of *bhadralok* in Assamese society. As J.H. Broomfield in his pioneering research on the social class of *bhadralok* divulged, "the starting point of the 'educated middle class'" (Broomfield 8) which came to take the most respected position in Bengal history was started when the British recruited an increasingly large number of Indian associates mostly from the upper classes like Brahmin, Bidya and Kaystha, most of them previously service for Mughal province or local Hindu Kingdoms" (Broomfield 10); but, in the state of Assam, the government officials hired by the British mainly from the Ahom oligarchy are mentioned as *dangoriya* (not *bhadralok*) in different official documents and newspaper articles.

Such understanding of an Assamese society reminds us about the writings of Lakshminath Bezbaroa and his *kripabari*<sup>4</sup> style, it is to cite here that the

writings of this Assamese stalwart not only linked Assam and Assamese people to different aspects of life but also exists at the core of modern Assamese nationalism and Assamese modernity. So, the researcher here eager to study how some of his writings mainly published in Jonaki<sup>5</sup> and Banhi<sup>6</sup> magazine projects the importance of *dangoriya* for Assamese masculinity. Among all his literary works, the researcher searched for Jonaki and Banhi magazine due to several reasons. Arguably, the rich writings of Jonaki and Banhi can be seen as one of the pioneer texts of Assamese linguistic nationalism (Sharma 144), on the other hand, these two magazines contributed to the perfection of the modern era of Assamese literature. The Jonaki and Banhi magazine played an important role in the steady spelling of the Assamese language, contributed to its richness in religion, philosophy, society, culture, language, history; Moreover, analysis of old literature, book criticism and *kripabari* works, in reality, gave perfection to the modern era of Assamese literature. With these two important texts, this paper also refers to the autobiographical writings of Lakshminath Bezbaroa.

Bezbaroa's account of Assamese society contains a deep understanding of perception about English educated Middle class who came back from Bengal after higher education to Assam and get themselves used to European lifestyle, wearing western clothes like shirts and coats, speaking in English during later half of the 19th century and first decades of 20th century during colonial rule. Such example can be found in his article 'Lukua Nam', where Bezbaroa mentions one of his childhood friend Satish who after getting an education from Bengal with Bezbaroa became "sahib"<sup>7</sup>, wears English dress like the coat, speaks English and incorrect in Assamese, making a joke of Assamese language. Through a comparison between the writer Bezbaroa himself and Satish, the article indicates how a bunch of English educated Assamese man internalized colonial modernity and the other half started focusing on upholding the Assamese language and tradition like read-write and speaks in Assamese. Such men were greeted by outsiders as *dangoriya*. When Bezbaroa meets, Nirmala who is a Bengali educated girl greets him as-

*Dangoriya moi apunar kakotor ejon niyomiya pathika.* (Tamuly 7)

(*Dangoriya*, I am a regular follower of your magazine.)

The group of people who stands in the spectrum of upholding Assamese tradition has a huge threat to European lifestyle and modernity. In the politics of the term *dangoriya*, it is interesting to see how; *babu*<sup>8</sup> or *bhadralok* has been denied by Assamese people as a word of respected man.

In one of his article, 'Babu aru srijut', Bezbaroa mentions -

*ami asomiya manuh, xake khare egal khai thaku, ami Babu tabu nohoi deuhe, tumi amak babu pati bahua xaji nogurnagoti nakariba deuhe, babu buli kole ami bor asambhantra kora jenhe pau, ear dwarai babu xobdotuk axambhanto mat bulisu tene navabiba.* (Bora & Hujuri 562)

(We are Assamese people, we live a simple life, we have no intention to be babu-

tabu, please do not make a joke of us, we feel insulted when someone calls us babu, but it doesn't mean that we are making insult of the word babu.)

He further extended the line as

*kunu ata bostu lukor pora lua jai ketia? Jetia sei bostur hochahochikoiyे amar avab hoi; aru avab noholeu jetia hei bostu amar sei shrenir thoka bostut koi uttam shrenir; aru tak graham korile ami bixexlabhoban hou. Engraji xikonî aru engraji sabhyata adi ami ghaikoi eidutakaron nimittehe graham korisuhok. Ei dutakaronor kuntur mukholoi sai aji ami bidexi "babu upadhi" loboloi hat melimhok? Amar eiupadhi sambodhanar avabot pora nai.* (Bora & Hujuri 562)

(When do we need to borrow something from others? That is when we feel lack of it, and sometimes when that is better in quality. This is the only reason why we choose to have English education and English culture. But which one reason among these two compels us to have outsider 'babu title'? We are rich in this regard and there is no reason to have this.)

In the same article, Bezbaroa refers to a newspaper named *Asam*, "The truth is, the titles such as Borborooah, Borooh, Phukan granted by the Assam Rajas were considered sufficiently honorary as not to require any further addition to them. For instance Dhjekialphookan, Anandaram or Borbhandarborooah Moniram is better designations than Babu Anandaram Dhekialphukan, Babu Moniram Borbhandar borooh, or Anandaram Dhekialphukan Esquire, or Moniram Borbhandar borooh Esquire" (Bora & Hujuri 562). The article also mentions:

*bangaliba an kunubidexik babu bular thait asomiyak ki bulibo lage, ei kotha tumi jadi najana tente tumi xiki loboloi jatna kora.* (Bora & Hujuri 563)

(If you do not know how to greet an Assamese gentleman instead of how we greet a Bengali or outsider 'babu', you should learn it.)

*agor axamiai babu mane marowari mahajan aru bangali manuhok e bujisil, ageye kunu axamiya dangoriya k babu buli dithakat nalage xamajikot u sambhodhan koribo nuarisil.* (Bora & Hujuri 564)

(Earlier Assamese people refers only to a Marowari businessman or Bengali gentleman as *babu*, it is beyond someone's imagination to call an Assamese man *babu*.)

Such words indicate how a term like *babu* and *borbabu* were considered as *bohiragoto* or outsiders and rejected by Assamese people; such writings signify how Assamese people were very selective in accepting the influx of modern life and ideas through Bengal. The dress has been an important identity marker of a status symbol in defining the respectful position of man in different societies. The clothing of men can also be an important metaphorical element as used by Assamese *dangoriya*. The most important element of Assamese men's clothing was *dhoti* or *suriya* before the arrival of modern dress code like shirt, coat and

pant; this was worn by every Assamese man. Birinchi Kumar Baruah mentioned that *dhoti* or *suriya* is the main clothing of Assamese men. Different styles of wearing a *dhoti* symbolized the class difference; a *dangoriya* (an elderly person in this context) in the pre-1980s was often seen wearing a *dhoti* that extended up to his feet (Baruah 149).

The Assamese language has been rich in vocabulary and words like *dangoriya* have been there from time immemorial. But, some of the Assamese literature including a bunch of essays written by Bezbaroa also reflects the availability of *bhadralok* – *etor* or *chotolok* in Assam during the 19th century. We can find such examples in 'Miri Jiyori' by Rajanikanta Bordoloi, one of the first Assamese novels published on 1894, (Bordoloi 9-13). But different writings on man in the 19th and 20th century reflect *dangoriya* as a proper replacement of *bhadralok* in academic writings. A comparison of the writings of Rajnarayan Basu and Lakshminath Bezbaroa is interesting in this point. Reference of a respected man as *Dangoriya* in Assamese literature can be tracked in different letters written to the editor of Junaki and Banhi; all the letters written to the editors of the magazines addressed as *dangoriya*, *srijut dangoriya* or *manybor dangoriya*. The image of normative masculinity in Bengal since the 19th century has been conveyed by the term *bhadralok* as mentioned by Rajnarayan and discussed by Chatterjee in Our Modernity (Chatterjee 5). Having said this, we will begin by dwelling a bit longer on Rajnarayan's concept of *bhadralok* as discusses by Chatterjee (5) as it has serious implications in our understanding of the concept of *dangoriya*. Rajnarayan Basu spends the longest time comparing 'those days' with 'these days' in terms of the body. This can also be seen in Assamese society where the idea of the body was significantly altered by the Assamese society's tryst with modernity.

Chatterjee discusses that Rajnarayan mentions a very interesting narrative:

Ask anyone and he will say, 'My father and grandfather were very strong men.' Compared with men of those days, men no have virtually no strength at all. If people who were alive a hundred years ago were to come back today, they would certainly be surprised to see how short in stature we have become. We used to hear in our childhood of women who chased away bandits. These days, leave alone women, we do not even hear of men with such courage. Men these days cannot even chase away a jackal (Chatterjee 4-5).

On the whole, quoting Rajnarayan, Chatterjee adds here, "Especially *bhadralok*, respectable people have now become feeble, sickly and short-lived" (Chatterjee 5). In terms of Assamese masculinity, this narrative is quite appropriate; it is very often a part of the everyday discourse of Assamese people to quote narratives about the great physical strength of their forefathers and ancestors. When Lakshminath Bezbaroa refers to his father in his biography, he depicts his father- *dangoriya* Dinanath Bezbaroa's- physical attributes as a steady man of few words, having no disease, adept in horse riding, who can

control an elephant, boating, cool calm and confident man who could defeat three muscular men in a fight (Saikia 121).

It is interesting to see how *dangoriya* has been used as an alternative to *bhadralok* in different platforms since then. The government officials hired by the British mainly from the Ahom oligarchy are mentioned as *dangoriya* (not *bhadralok*) in different official documents and newspaper articles. Life account of Dinanath Bezbaroa by his son Lakshminath Bezbaroa in his 1909 published book “Dangoriya Dinanth Bezbaruahr sankhripta Jibon Charit” (Saikia 118) foregrounds how the term *dangoriya* was used for respected British employed administrative officials during British rule. Publishing news about Dinanath Bezbaroa’s departure, Times of India, one of the foremost English daily in India wrote: “It is with extreme pain that we have to record the death of Dangoriya Dinanath Bezbaoroa” (Saikia 118).

The statesman published :

The death of Dangoriya Dinanath Bezbaroa at the age of 84 has deprived Assam of one of its best known inhabitants. (Saikia 118)

Additionally, Bezbaroa’s address of well-mannered Bengali gentlemen as ‘Bengali *bhadralok*’ in his article ‘Barbaruar Sithi’ (Saikia 212) indicates symbolism of Bengali elite class with the term *bhadralok* during this period by the non-Bengalis. This signifies another aspect of the term *bhadralok* in Assamese vocabulary which can be viewed as an aftermath of importing the working class from Bengal and the emergence of the educated English-speaking Assamese middle class who completed their education from Bengal.

In mocking the new English educated person who used to speak English whenever they got a chance to show off their status, Bezbaroa greeted the person as *dangoriya* instead of *bhadralok* or *babu* in his article ‘Barboroar Phu’ (Saikia 195), reflecting the indigeneity of *dangoriya* to refer those persons who tasted English education during the nineteenth century. Parimal Ghosh mentioned the knowledge of English as a very important quality of *bhadralok* (Ghosh 03), but in the case of *dangoriya*, such qualities are not mandatory. But, the new English educated middle class during the initial parts of the twentieth century which has played a huge role in Assam history reflects *bhadralok* and *babu* culture along with such quality. It is to be critically seen how Bezbaroa has accepted the influx of English education and culture, but denied terms like *babu* and *borbabu*.

*Dangoriya* has been a term with different qualities in a different context, but solely linked the concept of ‘respect’ of a man. In his article ‘Asomiya Jati dangor jati’, Bezbaroa mentions about different qualities of *jatiyo dangorota* (greatness of the nation) i.e. *tez* (blood), *bol* (strength), *sahisnuta* (calmness), *ekota* (unity), *sthirota* (steadiness), *gambhijya* (civilized), *byahambor* (joyful), *dharmanistha* (religious), *sadachar* (Politeness), *sangeetoprati anurag* (music lover) (Bora & Hujuri 28-32). It is noteworthy that Bezbaroa also problematizes the use of *dangoriya* by referring to some characters which allow the readers to

go through a bunch of chauvinist Assamese people during British rule. In his article 'Bhukendra Baruar Antollela', Bezbaroa mentions Bhukendra Barua *dangoriya* who decided to become a patriot after denied a government job, failed in study and life; but, through his public speaking qualities, he gained the support of people and established himself as a popular leader, he used to gather donation for an organization named Moran Sabha. In reality, he spends the entire donation for his trip to Calcutta in the name of giving memorial to British sahib (Tamuly 44-45). Such portrayal of *dangoriya* has a different connotation with the term used by British officials and Bezbaroa himself for his father. In another article 'Bhempuriya Mauzadar', Bezbaruah refers the term to a figure Bhempuriya Mauzadar, a British civil official, he is a rigid Brahmin figure who follows and enjoys a strong caste hierarchy and bow down under British colonial rule (Bora & Hujuri 120-123).

Bezbaroa's writing has given a great deal of importance to observation and perception about the image of an ideal Assamese man and how a great deal of politics has been linked with it in both 19th and 20th century Assam. The politics of language and vocabulary, dress and different parameters of defining a respectful Assamese man allows us a special canon in the study of Assamese nationalism and modernity. However, the researcher here does not completely deny the existence of a term like *bhadralok*, *babu* and *sahib* in Assamese society, but the point this article tries to establish that, *dangoriya* carries all the possible demand to be the keyword for Assamese masculinity. This article studies the perception of the Assamese middle class which were thoroughly established during the British government's employment in different jobs by English educated Assamese class. At best, the discussion can be concluded as considering the differences between Bengal and Assam in different parts of history, *dangoriya* is more suitable in terms of the respectable Assamese man instead of *bhadralok* which is also available in Assamese vocabulary and already established as a trademark of Bengal masculinity. But, where *bhadralok* is a social stratification based on education and intellectual power, *dangoriya* has class differences with its counterparts in every aspect of Assamese social life.

### **Notes :**

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- <sup>1</sup> The Ahom kingdom was a late medieval kingdom in the Brahmaputra Valley in Assam. It is well known for maintaining its sovereignty for nearly 600 years and successfully resisting Mughal expansion in Northeast India.
  - <sup>2</sup> Lachit Borphukan was a commander and Borphukan in the Ahom kingdom, located in present-day Assam, India, known for his leadership in the 1671 Battle of Saraighat that thwarted a drawn-out attempt by Mughal forces under the command of Ramsingh I to take over Ahom kingdom.
  - <sup>3</sup> Bir Chilaray, was the younger brother of Nara Narayan, the king of the Kamata Kingdom in the 16th century.

- <sup>4</sup> Laxminath Bezbaroa satirical comedies with a pseudo name **Kripabar Barbaroa** plays an important role in the study of Assam history.
- <sup>5</sup> Jonaki was an Assamese language magazine published from Calcutta in 1889. It was also the mouthpiece of the then Assamese literary society Oxomiya Bhaxa Unnati Xadhini Xobha in which the society's aim and objectives were regularly expressed.
- <sup>6</sup> Banhi was an Assamese language magazine first published in 1909.
- <sup>7</sup> A term denotes the government officials of higher order.
- <sup>8</sup> The title babu, also spelled baboo, is used in the Indian subcontinent as a sign of respect towards men. But, during colonial rule, babu refers to the government officials

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## **THE GAZE OF THE ‘OTHER’: A STUDY OFFREDERICK DOUGLASS’S NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS: AN AMERICAN SLAVE (1845)**

**Pronami Bhattacharya**

### **Abstract**

The subaltern “Other” has had no voice on account of race, class or gender, or the very intersectional nature of all these socio-cultural forces. This involves and institutes the fact that “norms” are determined and disseminated by the ones in power (centre) and imposed on the “other” (margin). The history of a state is usually the history of the ruling classes. As such, the subjugated voices get lost in the narrative of the powerful ‘other’. In *Prison Notebooks* (1971), while referring to the working class as ‘subaltern’, Antonio Gramsci makes a clear distinction between the history of the ruling classes and the history of the subaltern classes. Raising a similar concern, Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, in “Can a Subaltern Speak” (2010), tries to examine the condition and the resulting fate of the subaltern ‘subject’ and that how it can be disfigured by the politics of representation. With an aim to recover submerged histories and legitimize the ‘other’ gaze or point of view, this paper attempts to analyze Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* (1845). Douglass’s narrative is written from the perspective of one (slaves) who had been denied the right to gaze for long. The study, thus, acknowledges the presence of the “spectres”- taking cues from Jacques Derrida’s *Spectres of Marx* (1994)- that could challenge the Western notions of space and time while functioning as revolutionary mediums of postcolonial recovery.

**Keywords :** Subaltern, African American, mobility, slave narrative, gaze, ‘other’

*“There’s really no such thing as the ‘voiceless’. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.” – Arundhati Roy*

Historically, the subaltern “other” has had no voice because of race, class or gender, or the inter sectionality of all these. It involves and institutes the fact that ‘norms’ are determined and disseminated by the ones in power (centre) and imposed on the “Other” (margin). In *Prison Note books* (1971), while referring to the working class as ‘subaltern’, Antonio Gramsci makes a clear distinction between the history of the ruling classes and the history of the subaltern classes.

The history of a state is usually the history of the ruling classes. As such, the subjugated voices get lost in the narrative of the colonial oppressors.

Raising a similar concern, Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, in "Can a Subaltern Speak" (2010), tries to examine the condition and the resulting fate of the subaltern 'subject' and that how it can be disfigured by the politics of representation. This always keeps the subaltern in the marginal topography, which is a silent 'periphery' but acts as the 'centre' of voicelessness. She contends that the subalterns cannot be represented by an advantaged group; rather, they should speak for themselves and emerge as 'speaking' subject rather than the silent 'other' and thereby cease to be subaltern subjects. This emphasizes the self-reflexivity of the subaltern.

Recovering submerged/subalterned histories is instrumental in neutralizing colonial (cultural) hegemony and its persistent attempts to erase the past of the silenced 'objects'. In Toni Morrison's novels reclaiming the past is an indispensable condition for subjectivity. It restores a voice and appropriates history to those who were deprived of and denied the awareness of both. In postcolonial context, reclaiming the past means more than a literal or linear narrating of historical facts. Rather, redeeming the past is a process that requires that victims of oppression and marginalization recuperate their obliterated traditions and unearth the buried communal memories and personal histories. In *Beloved* (1987), Morrison recuperates a lost, painful chunk of history through the 'ghost of memories'. A physically absent ghost places a silenced past into the very centre of the narrative and the 'present' (as against the past or future) in the timeline of history. Derrida, in *Spectres of Marx* (1994) says,

To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept....that is what we would be calling here a hauntology... (202)

Thus, what Jacques Derrida proposed as Hauntology, an amalgamation of 'haunting' and 'ontology', could be taken as a way of thinking about the presence of absent figures, which haunt the 'present' world in an perplexing state of being neither alive nor dead. Acknowledging the presence of the 'spectres', could annoy the western notions of space and time, while functioning as revolutionary mediums of postcolonial recovery. It could make space for the synchronization of the past with the present and identifying and acknowledging the existence of alternative/ parallel histories. By examining Douglass's narrative through the lens of postcolonial studies, this paper seeks to discover the ways in which humanity could reconcile with those events or phenomena that modern history has reduced to be 'ghostly' or absent. Hauntology as a critical tool could supplant the canonical understanding of ontology and make the erstwhile 'silences' produce multiple layers of perspectives.

Addressing the writings of the African American ('slaves', bonded labours, etc.), thus, could suggest ways to engage with such unresolved histories, while making the world learn to look through a different gaze, the 'black' gaze. With

this aim, this paper endeavours to read Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* (1845).

The study would engage in assessing how the text could suggest ways of 'alternate' knowledge production and ways of writing that could embody the mutilation of the historical alternative. The resulting knowledge/ discourse could bridge the uncanny gap between subject and object (of knowledge), between past and present, between knowing and not-knowing. This study also aims at establishing the 'black' gaze as a legitimate, natural way of looking at life while trying to dismantle the prevalent understanding of history as a linear progression from a colonial/slave past to a liberated 'postcolonial' present. It is very important to accept and understand the 'other's' ways of seeing if, as Derrida says, we look for a possibility of a just future.

Travel writers, while detailing the 'other' during the cultural/ social/ political encounters, build on the structure of two vital elements, the "subject" and the "object." It has been well established that the subject position is a hegemonic fundamental (central) force that 'discovers', locates and catalogues the peripheral locations and people therein. For a long time, the colonial or 'imperial' travellers have embodied this central hegemonic dynamism. Thus, the colonial-male-white traveller has been the manufacturer of the 'ways of seeing'. In the words of E. Ann Kaplan, "The imperial gaze reflects the assumption that the white western subject is central much as the male gaze assumes the centrality of the male subject" (*Looking for the Other* 78). The present study is an effort delineated towards the recognition and examination of the "peripheral" locations and the "ways of seeing" as is manifest in the Douglass's narrative.

While trying to take note of and analysing the 'voices from the margins', this paper also tries to work at distinguishing the 'black' gaze from the classic *white-colonial-male* centric gaze, and thereby instituting the former as a valid institution in itself. In doing so, the study employs the theory of gaze that is evident in every travel narrative. A 'black' travel narrative at that is a source of wider and newer range of scholarships informing and adding to the theory. Travel writing has long been very authoritative for understanding the relation between the 'west-vs-rest'. In this respect, it is proposed that 'black' travel narratives proliferate various forms of gazing that might synchronize or clash with the hitherto extensively studied and dispersed 'white' gaze. In narrative representations of a journey, these texts often foreground the need to transcend the color bar, besides the variety and authenticity of the gaze of an African American.

As the first recognized American slave narrative, Olaudah Equiano's first person testimony of his travails in *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, a Slave, Written by Himself* (1789) is invaluable in providing agency to the 'marginalized'. He also records eyewitness accounts of Europe in its institutionalizing the brutal system of slavery. In this credible account of a slave and then a freeman, "the rhetorical devices defining embodies discourse...

reappear continually in travel accounts emerging throughout the African diaspora" (Smith 198). He can be seen as configuring an emancipatory form of travel writing using devices and images which released a set of archetypal patterns in slave narratives. Of these, the symbol of the "slave ship" (Smith 198) spans across the African American literary world, and most importantly African American travel writing. During the ill-repute 'middle-passage', for almost every African forced into the New World, the slave ship stood for a "hole" or a "dark hole", "hopeless and unending" (Smith 198). These and much more, slipped into the "collective unconscious" of the African American race for an eternity.

Apart from delineating such manifest features, the African American travel writing also upholds that: The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife – this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. (DuBois615). The mobility of African Americans, thus, struggles with multiple conception of self, a "double consciousness". Moreover, the survival of these two states—the African American at 'home' and 'abroad'—has to do with more than the simple assessment of 'home' and 'away' that all travelers undergo. There is an eternal presence of a "two-ness, -an American, a Negro; two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (Du Bois 694).

This paper works on the varying perspectives of African American travelers when they look at different places, cultures and people. Their gaze/s, also presents parallel narratives of the world, allowing the readers to revisit the colonial alternatives. This entails an analysis of the theory of gaze, for, perspectives are ways of gazing. It is the gaze and its mutuality between the 'subject' (gazer) and the 'object' (gazed) that results in the existential forces at work. John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* (1972) develops the concept of the gaze as an ideological construct, and goes on to discuss the 'ideal' spectator or the gazer, who is always considered a male. Modern-colonial history has been from the perspective of the active-male traveller in which the 'feminine other' has largely been absent. The African American narratives counter this binary and provide ample matter to fill in the gaps in the process of colonial meaning making. As Julian Wolfrey contends, if "the spectral is at the heart" of any modern narrative, then, 'to tell a story is always to invoke ghosts, to open a space through which something other returns' (*Victorian Haunting 1-3*)

Relating this to Postcolonial studies one contends that the colonial surveyor completely silenced its object of survey, and hence the gaps in meanings, and that the surveying gaze, synonymous with the Colonizing force, was always 'masculine', registering and narrating the 'feminine' colonized subjects. What this study also borrows from Berger is the idea that the act of gazing is always relational, i.e., we are also being seen by the other while we are looking at that other. According to him, this reciprocity of vision or gaze is more fundamental than that of spoken dialogue. Even Sartre develops that the gaze, that sanctions the subject to identify that the 'Other', is also a subject, as when he

says, "my fundamental connection with the Other-as-subject must be able to be referred back to my permanent possibility of being seen by the Other" (*Being and Nothingness* 256). Thus, encryptions in the act of seeing are significant in relation to gender, subject-object binary and predetermined ideological outlining of a particular culture and its people. Black travel narratives pose specific challenges, while representing a history of a habitually captivating, yet characteristically unknown or little known, subject. The rhetoric of 'blackness' inevitably encompasses cross-cultural growths and hybridity while stressing the interrelations between 'black' and white cultures.

### The 'Subaltern' Speaks

*I am invisible; understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves or figments of their imagination, indeed, everything and anything except me.*

— (Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*)

The horrors of slavery are usually dismissed with remarks such as "it's done; it's over". However, Morrison's *Beloved* establishes how history is not over and done with. Shelets the reader to re-vision and comprehend the hitherto obliterated African American history through non-western, 'coloured' gaze by retelling history in the words of former African slaves transported to and 'dumped in' America. As James Berger opines, "violence within the African American community can only be understood in a context in which [...] [the white power] continue[s] to violate African American lives." ("Ghosts of Liberalism" 191). Like denying the 'holocaust' (see Lipstadt 1993), the racist centre denied the violation of the 'blacks' on the margins, and the "American racial trauma submerged" ("Ghosts of Liberalism" 192).

African American traveller's gaze endures a consciousness which is rooted in the 'color of their body', leading them to be placed lopsided (negatively) in a racialized power relation for long. Bell Hooks, in her seminal essay, "The Oppositional Gaze" (1992), deliberate show 'blacks' (slaves) were punished mercilessly for 'looking' and that how "this traumatic relationship to the gaze...had informed 'black' spectatorship" (115). The slaves were completely "denied their right to gaze" (115), an experience which exhibited itself unto what we understand now as the "oppositional gaze". In a relation of power, subordinates procure knowledge through experience which mirrors that "there is a critical gaze that 'looks' to document, one that is oppositional" (116).

As such, gaze has a restricting control over those who receive it and ends up making them almost invisible, or 'ghostly'. Hence, African American travel writing comes back as a haunting phenomenon that seeks to speak for the absent past and destabilize the colonial fillers. The 'black' gazes, narrates and thereby

adorns various defining standard of being a white/civilized: “Out of the blackest part of my soul, across the zebra striping of my mind, surges this desire to be suddenly white” (*Black Skin White Masks*63). The black zebra striping can be considered as the colored/black’ consciousness that constructs the ideological veil that a ‘black’ person looks through. Thus the black person attempts to look back thereby produce “a return of knowledge” (“Power/Knowledge” 81).

The ‘white’ gaze was considered to be predominantly armored with a powerful gaze, a gaze of racial superiority, a gaze that was ‘all-knowing’. African-Americans, because they are ‘black’, are already the racially marked body that is not expected to be able to say something knowledgeable, meaningful, and important about race. As Frederick Douglass says in his *Narrative*, “for they had much rather see us engaged in those degrading sports, than to see us behaving like intellectual, moral, and accountable beings” (113). On the other hand, when ‘blacks’ render knowledge and look around at the world and produce multiple layers of gazes, that knowledge renders the racist operations of white bodies on the one hand, and engages the ‘black’ person in a series of polemics and eventually portrays ‘black’ viewpoints, aesthetics and cultural and individual archetypes.

In his *Narrative*, Frederick Douglass says, “for they had much rather see us engaged in those degrading sports, than to see us behaving like intellectual, moral, and accountable beings” (113). Due to the repeated denial of the right to see and articulate, writers like Douglass, are more aggressive of their right to ‘gaze’, and articulate (speak and write), and their writings seem to strongly emulate the consciousness of the ‘black’ society at large. The ‘slave’ writings attempts at uncovering the phantom and dispelling the guarded myths and secrets.

### **From the Margins to the Centre: Douglass’s Accounts**

Beginning 1820s, the endeavours of the thousands who were attempting at establishing an egalitarian society, have left a striking impact on the literature of the period. Circulation of slave stories from the past point toward a haunting that is rooted in tyrannical slave histories and that the gory past is being brought to the surface through the narratives. It is incontestably remarkable to read about the slave lives: their atrocious masters, overseers, and the multiple flight attempts by the slaves themselves to a free/er world, in the words of the slaves themselves. In the search for a “Utopia” (see Foster 329), Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative* outlines his journey from the fetters of slavery to that of being a free traveler. His travels, however, may not be extensive spatially, nonetheless, he makes diligent use of any escape route that he comes across, and thereby, creates the American space. He especially paints the South, in the Antebellum America, and becomes one of the celebrated names amongst the “moving slaves” (see Cox 65). Mobility remains, perhaps, the single most important factor in a slave’s life, as when Douglass says he could see his mother, who lived on another

plantation, only at night. He writes, "She made her journeys to see me in the night, traveling the whole distance on foot, after the performance of her day's work" (25). The invisible journeys have surfaced as a haunting account in Douglass's narrative.

## People

Douglass' *Narrative* begins with the inadequate facts about his birth and parentage that he is aware of; his father is some slave owner (that he is unacquainted with) and his mother is, Harriet Bailey, a slave. He says, "My father was a white man....The opinion was also whispered that my master was my father" (24). Being a Mulatto child (slave), he is not accepted by his father publicly and thus left to perish with his mother at a very young age; eventually he gets separated from his mother too like all other mulattos. For a child, this separation is pointless, besides being painful, and Douglass wonders if this is done "to hinder the development of the child's affection toward its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child" (24). This is the unavoidable outcome in almost all such cases. The 'blacks' were rendered with a crippled ontological self— black as they were, their existence was spun into a black invisibility.

The lack of knowledge of birth dates, place of origin or even the parentage was a customary trait of the slaves— it was almost a 'spectral' life being forced on them. Douglass notices that 'blacks'/slaves know as little of their age as horses know of theirs" (23) and in his knowledge "it is the wish of most masters...to keep their slaves thus ignorant" (23). Whereas, the "white children could tell their ages" (23). As a child, he could never understand as to why the 'black' people are "deprived of the same privilege" (23). It is considered "improper and impertinent, and evidence of a restless spirit" (23) if a slave makes inquiries of any sort.

He meets his first master, Captain Anthony, while in Tuckahoe, Maryland. He is a owner of about 30 slaves in his two-three farms; he is not a rich master in comparison to many others who own hundreds of slaves. Colonel Lloyd, another of his master, keeps three to four hundred slaves, and "owned a large number more on the neighboring farms" (32). In fact, Lloyd owns so many slaves that "he did not know them when he saw them" (41-42). The slaves are simply a lot of chattel to him 'to be owned'.

The Slave owners "could not brook any contradiction from a slave" (41). On one occasion, Colonel Lloyd says, "a slave must stand, listen, and tremble; and such was the literal case.... a man between fifty and sixty years of age, uncover his bald head, kneel down upon the cold, damp ground, and receive upon his naked and toil-worn shoulders more than thirty lashes at the time" (41). Lloyd's three sons "enjoyed the luxury of whipping the servants when they pleased" (41). Also, none of the masters could tolerate other's slaves on their farm, even if it happens by mistake. Once, a slave of Llyod mistakenly enters Mr. Beal Bondly's farm while

fishing for oysters to make up for his scanty allowance. He is shot down without a moment of hesitation by Mr. Bondly. In the white community, it was prevalent amongst the little white boys that: "It was worth a half-cent to kill a 'nigger', and a half-cent to bury one" (50). One Mr. Freeland, another of Douglass's owners, is the "best master" (115), for he didn't portray a duplicity of wearing a religious cloak and torturing the slaves, or keeping a watchful eye and lash the slaves on every drop of a hat.

The slave owners appoint an overseer on every farm to overlook and manage slaves. Overseers are mostly the personification of devil himself, as the narrative mirrors. Colonel Lloyd's slaves are overlooked by Mr. Severe; Douglass observes, he is "rightly named: he was a cruel man" (34). He is always armed with "a large hickory stick and heavy cowhide" (34). He speaks of his inhuman ways:

I have seen him whip a woman, causing the blood to run half an hour at the time; and this too, in the midst of her crying children, pleading for their mother's release...was a profane swearer... scarce a sentence escaped him but that was commenced or concluded by some horrid oath.... From the rising till the going down of the sun, he was cursing, raving, cutting, and slashing among the slaves of the field. (34)

As the severity of Mr. Severe reaches peak and he is replaced by Mr. Hopkins as the latter succumbs to death; the slaves regard his death as "the result of a merciful providence" (34). Hopkins is considered a different man as he is "less cruel, less profane, and made less noise, than Mr. Severe" (35). It is a deplorable irony that slaves call him a "good overseer" (35) just because he whipped, all right, but he did not seem to take pleasure in it. Due to his supposed lack in the "necessary severity" (45) to suit colonel Lloyd, Hopkins is supplanted by Mr. Austin Gore, "a man possessing, in an eminent degree, all those traits of character indispensable to what is called a first-rate overseer" (45). Austin proves to be "proud, ambitious, and persevering...artful, cruel, and obdurate" (45); "He tortures with the slightest look, word, or gesture, on the part of the slave" (45). He perfectly replicates the aphorism laid down by slaveholders: "It is better that a dozen slaves suffer under the lash, than the overseer should be convicted, in the presence of the slaves, of having been at fault" (45). One Captain Anthony keeps Mr. Plummer on his farm who is a "miserable drunkard, a profane swearer, and a savage monster" (27) and is perennially "armed with a cowhide and a heavy cudgel" (27-28). It is the 'white man's rule' that governs the lives of the 'blacks'.

People who argued in favor of slavery, routinely opined that slaves were happy, citing the fact that slaves would sing as they worked. However, on the contrary, "slaves sing most when they are most unhappy" (38), and the "dense old woods, revealing at once the highest joy and deepest sadness...sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone" (36). In his narrative, Douglass tries to capture the most wounding sentiments that come alive in slave songs, whose profound meaning, however, he could not comprehend when he was in their circle. When he becomes free and comes out of the circle, the spectres of the

songs haunt him and intensify his hatred for the institution of slavery. For him the songs:

Told a tale of woe.... Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains.... I have frequently found myself in tears while hearing them.... To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery.... If anyone wishes to be impressed with the soul-killing effects of slavery, let him go to Colonel Lloyd's plantation. (37)

The songs act as a vent for relieving their pain just as "an aching heart is relieved by tears" (38). Thus, throughout his life Douglass could hear the echoes of such melodic pain—"slavery has ended but something of it continues to live on..." (Gordon, *Haunting and the Social Imagination* 139).

A peculiar trait about the slaves is that they "imbibe prejudices" (43) and engage in a race to decide and declare as to whose master is better. Douglass observes, "Many, under the influence of this prejudice, think their own masters are better than the masters of other slaves.... Indeed, it is uncommon for slaves even to fall out and quarrel among themselves about the relative goodness of his own over that of the others" (43). Meanwhile, the truth that prevails is that none of the masters are even human, let alone being good or bad. Carrying on in their peculiar line of thought, the slaves affirmed that "the greatness of their masters was transferable to themselves. It was considered as being bad enough to be a slave; but to be a poor man's slave was deemed a disgrace indeed!" (44). On the other side, these slaves prove to be "noble souls; they not only possessed loving hearts, but brave ones" (115). It is there simplicity that makes them get easily manipulated too. The oppressive and restricting hegemony of the 'whites' rendered the 'blacks' with a myopic understanding of grace as against disgrace.

When Douglass is around five to eight years old, he has plenty of leisure time for himself since he is not old enough to work in the fields and, thus, gets "seldom whipped" (51) by his master. However, he intolerably suffers from another evil, hunger and cold. His memory races past, "In hottest summer and coldest winter, I was kept almost naked-no shoes, no stockings, no jacket, no trousers, nothing but a coarse linen shirt...no bed...used to steal a bag which was used for carrying corn to mill...crawl into the bag, and there sleep" (51). The only food that the slaves receive is a "coarse corn meal boiled...called *mush*...put into a large wooden tray or trough, and set down upon the ground" (52). They are fed like animals; sometimes even worse.

Then arrives "three of the happiest days" (52) in his life when he is told that he would travel to Baltimore to work for Captain Thomas Auld's brother, who is Captain Anthony's son-in-law,. Straight away, as directed by Mrs. Lucretia, he starts washing and cleaning himself: "I must get all the dead skin off my feet and knees...for people in Baltimore were very cleanly, and would laugh at me if I looked dirty" (53). He is also delighted on the promise of a pair of trousers if he gets himself cleaned.

To his downright surprise, Mrs. Auld, his new mistress in Baltimore, has “a white face beaming with the most kindly emotions” (55). He is appointed to look after her little son. For a white to have a softer countenance for a ‘black’ is an unusual experience for him: “It is a new and strange sight to me, brightening up my pathway with the light of happiness” (55). He regards himself as being divinely privileged for having come to such a state of unexpected bliss; the irony is that he is still a slave. He claims his mistress to be:

A woman of the kindest heart and finest feelings...had never had a slave under her control previously.... I was utterly astonished at her goodness.... The meanest slave was put fully at ease in her presence. (57)

However, this is a fleeting experience as “the fatal poison of irresponsible power was already in her hands, and soon commenced its infernal work” (57). Mrs. Auld starts teaching him the language of the masters, English letters. As he progresses, Mr. Auld finds this out and chastises her heavily. The masters considered this as a process of defiling the best nigger in the world. Mr. Auld instructs his wife, “If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing” (58). Thus, Douglass learns what is white man’s power and that “it is almost an unpardonable offence to teach slaves to read in this Christian country” (65). These moments seasoned his journey of becoming a future abolitionist as he “understood the pathway from slavery to freedom” (59).

The mistress, however, slowly transforms and starts unbecoming of herself while slowly donning the typical garb of a white that Douglass had known before coming to her. He writes, “Slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me. When I went there, she was a pious, warm, and tender-hearted woman.... Slavery soon proved its ability to divest her of these heavenly qualities.... She finally became even more violent in her opposition than her husband himself” (64). On the other hand, he prepares to drop his slave-self and become a different person altogether—by receiving the *inch*, he now prepares to take the *ell*.

However, now that Douglass is outside the immediate chains of slavery, the incapacity to look at the situation of the ‘black’ people slowly ceases to exist and the existential plight of countless becomes clear to him now. As he reads more and more, his vision and mission becomes clearer and stronger; his understanding of the whites and ‘black’s extends. He says, “The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers” (67). His sojourn at Baltimore lays bare another cunning trait of the white community. The whites “encourage slaves to escape” (69), and in order to get reward, catch them and hand them over to their masters. His gaze could now perforate through the wretched condition of his brethrens. The myriad imperceptible spectres now act as become visible and produce knowledge within an episteme of memory, and inheritance.

Eventually there ensues a fight between Master Thomas and Master Hugh, and Douglass is called back to Maryland. Thomas finds him “unsuitable for his purpose” (86) and deduces that this is the result of the city life and its malicious effects. Douglass writes to his master (Thomas), “It had almost ruined me for

every good purpose, and fitted me for everything which was bad" (86-87). Immediately Douglass is placed "to be broken" (87). He comes across a group of people who *break* the slaves just like a horse is broken and tamed; they are called the "negro-breaker and slave driver" (109). Mr. Covey who has "acquired a very high reputation for breaking young slaves" (87) is appointed to 'break' Douglass. He is one of those (rare) slaveholders who "could not and did not work with his hands" (91). Slave breakers mostly work like spies. Douglass outlines Covey:

His coming were like a thief in the night.... He was under every tree, behind every stump, in every bush, and at every window, on the plantation. He would sometimes mount his horse, as if bound to St. Michael's, a distance of seven miles, and in half an hour afterwards you would see him coiled up in the corner of the wood-fence, watching every motion. He would, for this purpose, leave his horse tied up in the woods. (92)

The apparatus of corporeal vulnerability circumscribed the body from encompassing its co-inhabited space, thereby, eliminating it (body) from that space altogether.

## Places

The first place that Douglass, as a child, familiarizes with is a plantation farm where his mother is a slave worker. Plantation farms became floating signifiers of suffering obliterating the 'other' in the process. Douglass is supposed to be a mulatto, a white master's child, but the plantations have the rules that, "the children of slave women shall in all cases follow the condition of their mothers" (26). A hellish place trafficked with lust and torture, Douglass is, thus, born as a mulatto child on a plantation. The masters trade off mulattos for the downright detestation and cruelty of the (white) mistress towards the latter that navigate all boundaries of tolerance. And until a mulatto is sold off, the master "must not only whip them himself, but must stand by and see one white son tie up his brother...and ply gory lash to his naked back" (26). The state of the mulatto kids thus, is worse than the 'black' ones.

The 'inhuman' plantations have vast areas for growing tobacco, wheat and corn are in great abundance. Colonel Lloyd's production from his huge farms is sold in Baltimore. Many plantations taken together act as platform of great business and governance, where "disputes among overseers were settled" (32). Several mechanical works such as, black smiting, shoemaking and mending, cartwrighting, grain-grinding, coopering, weaving, etc., are also all carried out on the plantations wearing "a business-like aspect" (35). Such places display power and grandeur. Lloyd's plantation is known as the Great House Farm. Douglass notices that "a representative could not be prouder of his election to a seat in the American Congress, than a slave on one of the out-farms would be of his election to do errands at the Great Farm House" (35). It is a matter of pride for the slaves to work in this 'Great House' and earn great confidence in them by the master. Moreover, this place is also acts as a shield from the endless whiplash of the

overseers and masters while in the field. Nevertheless, Douglass could not find “anything great in the Great House, no matter how beautiful or powerful” (54) with not even the basic of the amenities for the slaves. The house is a place, which, despite every demonstration of majesty or defence to the slave, breeds slavery.

Thus, “going to Baltimore laid the foundation, and opened the gateway” (56) to all his subsequent affluence and he looks at it as a manifestation of some kind providence. He thinks how “there were a number of slave children that might have been sent from the plantation to Baltimore.... I was chosen from among them all, and was the first, last, and only choice” (56). He considers himself blessed, and finds Baltimore a place with a “marked difference, in the treatment of slaves” (60) from his erstwhile place. Here people are “better fed and clothed, and enjoy privileges altogether unknown to the slave on the plantation” (60). In fact in “every city slaveholder is anxious to have it known of him, that he feeds his slaves well; and it is due to them to say, that most of them do give their slaves enough to eat” (60). It is a peculiar kind of duplicity and double-standard of the city slave-owners though.

On being frequently asked about his feelings on being Free State vs slave state, Douglass uses a few brilliant images to generate his feelings on free lands like New York and Baltimore: “It was a moment of the highest excitement I ever experienced. I suppose I felt as one may imagine the unarmed mariner to feel when he is rescued by a friendly man-of-war from the pursuit of a pirate”; “immediately after my arrival at New York...I felt like one who had escaped a den of hungry lions” (143). These expressions narrate the distinct atmospheres of a free state as against the slave state.

However, such places also make him go through forlorn feelings as “he is in the midst of thousands, and yet a perfect stranger” (143). Slavery birthed ecologies of forlorn nonexistence. Although he is with his own brethren, he is cynical about laying bare his sadness in front of them “for the fear of speaking to the wrong one” (143) as “the ferocious beasts of the forest lie in wait for their prey” (143). In fact, he adopts the dictum “Trust no man!”, as he starts his journey from slavery to freedom (144). Moreover, he is amidst abundance, and is yet hungry; in a place full of gorgeous houses, yet homeless. Something is amiss in him, as may be in many other ‘blacks’.

Douglass persistently keeps changing his name as he tries to leave behind slavery. It is New Bedford which gives him his final name, Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey. He is however, quite surprised at the general appearance of the New Bedford, a northern place:

I found to be singularly erroneous.... I had very strangely supposed, while in slavery, that few of the comforts, and scarcely any of the luxuries, of life were enjoyed at the north, compared with what were enjoyed by the slaveholders of the south...came to this conclusion that... northern people owned no slaves... in the absence of slaves, there could be no wealth, and very little

refinement. And upon coming to the north, I expected to meet with a rough, hard-handed, and cultivated population, living in the most Spartan-like simplicity, knowing nothing of ease, luxury, pomp...how palpable I must have seen my mistake. (148-49)

Everything is "clean, new and beautiful" (150). There are no ramshackle houses with poverty-stricken inmates. It's a habitable, content place. The spectral invisibility of his existence finds ecology of visibility, peripheral though.

## Conclusion

Douglass's gaze through his past and present is enthralling in its refined and intelligent accounts of people and places; even an unfeeling reader can get stimulated by its brilliance if not moved by its passion. He ontologically positions the "black" life into discernibility that threaded through 'ecologies of non-existence' for long. Douglass's gaze (perspective) seems to disdain pity, but his narration is suggestive of sympathy, as he meant life to be, in the colored world, that he lived in and gave his life for. In delineating characters, it is not easy to make real people come to life. Douglass's writing is extremely brief and episodic to develop any rounded character. Nevertheless, he effectively generates a wholesome of America— place that break him and pull him down or resurrect him. At one place he meets people to whom he is a 'black' to be scorned, and at other places, people find splendour in that very color.

In the words of Fanon: "Ontology does not allow us to understand the being of the black man, since it ignores the lived experience..." (*Black Skin, White Masks* 90). Thus, texts like Douglass's call for the creation and spread of a 'hauntology' of color (blackness) to vouch for the epistemology of both presence and absence, born out of accounts of extremes of pain, loss, and absence. African American travel writing and the activity of gazing (and the eventual meaning making)— gazing and mobility being the 'master's' tool for long— together make one of the most effective ways to 'haunt' (counter) the canon and make submerged stories surface, while legitimizing the 'black' perspective or point of view.

Thus, Douglass's gaze paints a candid abolitionist horror tale, albeit are markably humane and compelling one. He provides a fuller and more nuanced narrative account of the African American slaves while trying to relate an account of the 'others' (whites in his case) as well, thereby blurring the traditional understanding of 'centre' and 'margin'. His narrative is a strong portrayal of the voice of the 'subalterns', one that makes the almost forgotten, 'obliterated' history of the slaves take centre-stage.

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# THE CYBORG LIVES OF THE FRANKENSTEIN MYTH: A STUDY OF RE/PRESENTATION AND CONSUMPTION OF *FRANKENSTEIN* IN SELECT 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY POP CULTURE ADAPTATIONS

**Sango Bidani and Zahra Rizvi**

## Abstract

This essay aims to explore the Frankenstein Myth through a close reading of select 21<sup>st</sup> century popular cultural texts, namely *Black Mirror*'s "Be Right Back" and *Victor Frankenstein*, released in the year 2013 and 2015 respectively. Through a close reading of these texts, the paper proposes to read them as markers of our current engagement with science in an increasingly technology driven society. The essay seeks to make an analysis of the Frankenstein myth and the monster through cyborgian and posthuman considerations to understand the various intersections and networks that stem from recreations of Mary Shelley's text. A study of the seriality and virality of the aforementioned adaptations through the presence of the various 'monster' figures seeks to illuminate the closer enmeshing of human lives with science and technic mediated through frames of loss.

**Keywords :** Frankenstein; adaptation; popular culture; cyborg; posthuman

## Introduction

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* (1819) has been subject to numerous adaptations on the big screen as well as the small screen. This process of adapting the narrative of Frankenstein from its literary form into the visual medium has been going on since the nineteenth century itself with Richard Brinsley Peake's adaptation, *Presumption; or, the Fate of Frankenstein*, being seen by Mary Shelley herself at the English Opera House (*Shelley's Ghost* n. pag.). The reception history of both the novel and the film adaptations have often focused on the conflict between science and religion, of powerful questions of life and death, creation and destruction and the problem of the "monster" that was first created and then abandoned by Victor Frankenstein. However, what is interesting to note about the film adaptations of Frankenstein is that they in a way trace the evolution in the understanding of the concept of "adaptation" and,

as this paper will subsequently show, its “consumption” in Western academia. When one is making this claim, what one is alluding to is the fact that the very first adaptations of the novel tried to be close to the source text, that is the novel, and thereby there was an uncanny resemblance to the novel written by Mary Shelley. However, as the twentieth century moved on, slowly the adaptations of the novel started exploring other aspects of the novel that had hitherto not been explored until that time. Those included presenting the narrative from the point of view of the monster, to his search for a companion to finally looking at futuristic representations of the uneasy relationship between the creator and the created, the consumer and the consumption. One of the examples of an adaptation that was extremely close to the original source text was the 2004 mini-series that was released in America titled *Frankenstein* which followed the novel more closely than most adaptations. In other words, the fabula as was discussed in the context of narratology, remains the same but the context and fluidity in the re/presentation of the fabula takes precedence. The context thereby gains extra significance in the way the adaptation appropriates the fabula and thereby highlights aspects that have remained hidden until this point.

Another way in which the adaptations under consideration in this paper elucidate on the evolution in our understanding of adaptations is that while the first source it looks at, the film text, is a cinematic adaptation in the traditional sense, the second one is an episode of a web series. It is important to point out here that the new definition of adaptation as propounded by the Chicago School of Media Studies allows the scope to move from the adaptation of films on the big screen to the small screen. Mark Brokenshire in his entry on Adaptation on the Chicago School of Media Theory says as follows: “As content moves away from notions of a single, stable source, and an identifiable author, and towards an era of transmedia creation by multiple entities and media conglomerates, it is the biological meaning of the word which would appear to have a greater relevance to more contemporary notions of adaptation” (n.pag.). Hence, an episode of a web series becomes a part of the expanded understanding of the concept of adaptation in media studies. Therefore, in this way the adaptations discussed here track the evolution in the understanding of the term “adaptation.”

There has also been an exploration by some critics and scholars about why the narrative of Frankenstein continues to be such a popular narrative to fall back on whenever one is facing a crisis in the engagement between the sciences and the humanities. For example, Philip Ball in his essay titled “Frankenstein’ Reflects the Hopes and Fears of Every Scientific Era” published in *The Atlantic* on April 20, 2017 observes how while one always considers this narrative as a cautionary tale about science and the perils of misusing it, what has not been emphasized enough is that how the cultural legacy of this text is far more complicated than what has been appreciated so far. Therefore, there is a need to expand the critical horizon and look at the other aspects of this fascinating text that continues to capture the imagination of the reading and filmic public even now, more than two centuries after it was originally written. While the novel was

a specific response to the contextual situation in the nineteenth century, with its conflict between science and religion, new technology and the question of the 'human; in light of the emergence of Enlightenment in England, perhaps this text needs to be considered more as a mythic text that can be used to explore the relationship between human beings and science across centuries through its adaptive seriality.

Drawing on this unexplored aspect of the complex cultural legacy of the text, this essay would like to do a close reading of two narratives in the visual medium, one of which is a cinematic adaptation that was released in the year 2015 and the other being an episode from the web series titled *Black Mirror*. While focusing largely on a close reading of these two adaptations, the essay will allude to earlier adaptations and explain how these modern-day adaptations of the novel are different from the earlier cinematic adaptations of the text and how they illuminate certain aspects that have become even more critical with the current scenario across the world caused by the pandemic. Perhaps the biggest lesson that one needs to learn is about how the relationship between human beings, science and technology and nature has become far more complicated. One finds it urgent to re-evaluate this relationship to understand the ecosystem that has become increasingly disjointed and simultaneously hyperconnected due to one's over/dependence on technology in the contemporary era and its lived experiences. This will become acutely prevalent with the episode from the web series *Black Mirror* that will be under consideration in this paper.

Along with looking at the re/presentation and the complicated cultural legacy of the Frankenstein myth this paper would also explore how and why the narrative of Frankenstein continues to be devoured so voraciously in the current scenario. This paper would be using the methodological tools stemming from the intersection between Cultural Studies, Adaptation Studies and Cyborg and Posthuman Studies, to explore the questions posed in this paper.

Shane Denson in "Marvel Comics' Frankenstein: A Case Study in the Media of Serial Figures" mentions an interesting dialogue from Marvel Comics' *The Monster of Frankenstein #3* (May 1973) where a figure cries, "God help us! It's still alive!" (n. pag.) to introduce and acknowledge the recurrence of the Frankenstein myth in popular culture and media as "a series of endlessly quoted, conventionalized representations" and suggests that "the comic belongs to that series and that it is capable of both taking ownership of it and writing its continuation" (Denson 531). The remark holds true for continuing representations of the Frankenstein myth in the popular imaginary but even more so for a theoretical understanding of the consumption of the Frankenstein monster and the myth. One must look at both the monster and the myth to understand this consumption because the two are so closely knit that one informs the other as parts of an assemblage, the myth being as much a part as the miscellaneous body of the monster and vice-versa.

## The Frankenstein Myth and Its Network Of Re/Presentation and Seriality

Before exploring the two adaptations that form the core of this paper, it is necessary to point out why there is an attempt and a need to look at Frankenstein adaptations as mythic in nature and why it is important to consider these adaptations as re/presentations of the original tale of Frankenstein. What lends the Frankenstein its mythic propensity is that the narrative written by Mary Shelley in 1819 in a particular context of 19<sup>th</sup> century England has captured the imagination of people across the ages, with each adaptation using the frame narrative to explore aspects of the relationship between human beings and science and thereby capturing the hopes, aspirations and fears of the age in which it was being adapted. It is this aspect of the timelessness of the narrative by Mary Shelley that lends itself to being considered as a mythic text that has relevance across ages and contexts. There is a reason why the cultural significance of this mythic text deserves one's critical attention. The reason is that while it is generally considered a cautionary tale about science and the argument between science and religion, there are many aspects of the narrative which points to its larger significance in society that these adaptations try to elucidate and therefore unless one looks at all these diverse perspectives, one cannot understand why this text has created a monster out of a myth and a myth out of a monster.

The history of adaptations of Frankenstein begins in the year 1910 with the first silent production of the literary narrative. This process of adaptation and retelling of the myth of Frankenstein continues till date. Also, the range of the kinds of adaptations start with silent films to science fiction films to satires and parodies. The sheer diversity of the kind of adaptations shows how the text has acquired a serial and viral aspect. Also, each of these adaptations range from being extremely faithful to the texts, to adaptations which would be considered as a "loose adaptation" which just use the frame narrative to discover other aspects of the text that haven't been explored until now. Among these is one of the adaptations that is the focus of this paper, namely the first episode of Season 2 of the web series *Black Mirror*, which is a dystopic science fiction web series. This episode titled "Be Right Back" was first aired on 11 February 2013 on Channel 4 in Britain.

The reason why Web Series as a form of adaptation is amenable to what this paper is calling a re/presentation of a literary narrative is because there is no compulsion to be faithful to the text given that it does not have the luxury of dwelling into all aspects of the text that is being adapted. Due to the limitation of brevity, a Web Series will have a series of Episodes which will each focus on a particular topic or theme and develop it in a nuanced manner that captures the imagination of the audience in a short space of time. This issue of brevity is turned into an advantage by Web Series makers to highlight aspects that might not have been considered due to the desire to be faithful to the text, as was the case in the twentieth century when fidelity discourse was extremely prominent in Adaptation Studies. With a Web Series having no such compulsion, it utilizes the

fabula and constructs its own syuzhet to elucidate a new perspective. This is precisely what makes Web Series and their episodes amenable to exploring unique aspects of a timeless text.

Keeping this in mind, one can look at the first episode of Season Two, titled *Be Right Back* as a re/presentation of the narrative presented by Mary Shelley in her novel *Frankenstein*. Using the fabula as a frame narrative, this episode brings to light how even though with the help of artificial intelligence, the protagonist of the episode tries to deal with the grief of the death of her boyfriend, but the mechanical nature of artificial intelligence complicates the relationship between the human and the non-human.

What sets this adaptation apart from the other adaptations and re/presentations of the Frankenstein myth is the closing sequence. While most of the adaptations till now had focused either on the creation of the monster and the terror that he wreaked or on trying to show the monster having a soulmate, this adaptation goes a step further. After Martha realizes that the AI Ash cannot be/cannot replace her real boyfriend and she lets out a shattering scream when the monster refuses to jump into the water (a refusal that is commanded by her because the AI android listens to her), suddenly the scene shifts back to her house. At this moment the audience, for the first time, sees Martha and Ash's who is presented in the scene. It is inventive on the part of the creators of the episode that the daughter enters on her birthday, reminding one of the other birth that Martha had been party to, that is, the birth of the monster, the AI android Ash. As Martha cuts the cake for herself and the daughter, she is surprised that the daughter insists that three pieces of cake be cut. After the third piece of cake is cut, the daughter takes it upstairs to the attic where the monster is standing, looking outside listlessly. When the daughter calls out, he turns around and is pleasantly surprised that the young girl has brought a piece of cake in her hand for him and he wishes her cheerfully on her birthday. After giving the cake to the android, the daughter calls out to Martha below and asks her to come upstairs and after hesitating Martha sets foot on the stairs as the scene fades out. This ending problematizes the Frankenstein myth in two ways. The first way is by the fact that the writers show the monster in a family setting at the end of the narrative, making a marked distinction from other adaptations where the monster is either destroyed or left to a lonely, desolate life. Secondly, the ambiguity with which the scene fades away just as Martha takes her first step on the stairs, leaves it open ended but suggestive whether Martha's 'human daughter' might help her overcome her earlier realized awkwardness towards android Ash. In this sense then, this is a loose adaptation and thereby a re/presentation of the Frankenstein myth, adding a unique layer to the miscellaneous nature of the myth.

This episode is a powerful reminder of the wider social implications of the technology driven world that one inhabits thanks to the progress in civilization. The idea behind creating an AI replica to deal with the sense of loss felt due to the death of a human being interestingly becomes a focal point for discussing the

idea of the human, the posthuman and the parahuman. At a time where our world is being subsumed by technology at increasingly more and more aspects of our lives, it is a glaring depiction of the networks of science, technological advancements, the living and the machinic and the complex synthesis of life itself.

It is also interesting to note that when Martha is told by her friend that she can use this technology to deal with the sense of loss then she screams and feels completely horrified by the idea that an artificially created human being can help deal with the personal loss she felt. However, until the very end when she realizes that the artificially induced Ash doesn't behave like her deceased boyfriend, she did find solace in the artificial voice that she hears of Ash. It's when the AI Ash takes human form that she realizes the inherent absence in the online presence of her boyfriend which is embodied by android Ash.

Another interesting adaptation which is a modern day take on the Frankenstein myth is the 2015 adaptation titled *Victor Frankenstein*. It is important to note here that there is a similarly titled film called *Victor Frankenstein: Terror of Frankenstein* that was released in 1977. While the 1977 adaptation focused on the havoc wreaked by the Frankenstein monster, this 2015 adaptation presents a postmodern prequel to the Frankenstein myth while being set in the 1870s, in the same century in which Mary Shelley set her narrative. What sets this narrative apart from the other Frankenstein adaptations is that this film narrates the story of Frankenstein from the perspective of a young assistant who initially wants to help Victor Frankenstein but later withdraws from the project.

The film while being set in the 1870s presents a new perspective on the Frankenstein myth by depicting a complex web of past histories that force Victor Frankenstein to enlist the services of his junior assistant who is excellent in his knowledge of human anatomy. What sets this adaptation apart from the other adaptations of the Frankenstein myth is that it shows the humane dilemma that faces both Victor Frankenstein and his assistant, and which ultimately results in an unlikely reconciliation and an acknowledgement of the problem with creating a humanoid. It is also interesting to note that while to a certain extent Igor Straussman understands Victor Frankenstein's desire to create the humanoid, at the same time, notwithstanding his initial reluctance to acknowledge the flaws in the experiment, it is Igor who tries to make Victor understand that he is making a mistake in the very motivations of his experiment, the religious idea of guilt hiding behind the very scientific idea of the humanoid. When finally Igor Straussman saves Victor Frankenstein from his own creation, the latter realizes that perhaps his creation was flawed. Additionally, in showing the conflicting emotions that were depicted by Igor Straussman because of his own relationship with an aerialist who he had saved during a circus program that he attended, which led to him joining forces with Victor Frankenstein, the adaptation shows the humane side behind the conflict that ensues between him and Victor Frankenstein.

Another detail that needs to be kept in mind while considering this adaptation as a re/presentation of the Frankenstein myth is that while in the novel he is roundly harassed for his views and his unorthodox experiments, in this cinematic adaptation, the police officer who goes to charge Victor Frankenstein for conducting these experiments is charged with trying to carry out arrests without any warrant. This minute detail helps us in getting a sense of the postmodern as in the nineteenth century it was not uncommon for arrests to happen without any warrants. The fact that this religious police inspector was suspended shows what he considered blasphemy is no longer considered blasphemous in modern society as one is fast moving towards an age where artificial intelligence will not only be possible but will also play a far more important role than would have ever been possible in the nineteenth century where the debate between religion and science was at its peak.

### **Consumption, Cyborgian Bodies and the Frankenstein Monster**

In *Black Mirror's* "Be Right Back", one comes face to face with yet another embodiment of this myth but perhaps in a sense as wildly novel as ordinarily relatable. The first episode of Season Two, "Be Right Back" features the use of technology and data by a grieving woman to generate a Frankensteinian monster of her dead partner in order to deal/prevent dealing with the loss. Just like the monster is stitched together from stolen body parts, Martha's monster, the AI Ash, is stitched together from the 'stolen' parts of her partner Ash's digital presence. Grieving over her loss after just moving in together, Martha's life is intruded by advice from people and programs alike, suggesting ways to get over her loss. One such instance which serves to provide a striking glance at the ways technology is even more enmeshed in human lives in the near-future is when Martha receives targeted advertisement which perceptively but invasively offer books that can help deal with grief. The normality of Martha swiping away the notification from her touch-free laptop through simple hand movements offers more than a view into this future, it offers a commentary on the parahuman aspects of what it means to be human in hypertech societies where devices are increasingly as extension of one's self and gradually, maybe even as much a part of oneself as the hand which swipes the notification away. Even before one meets AI Ash, the cyborgization of Martha's (and Ash's identity) is presented to the viewers through subtle cues, whether it is Ash's deep investment in his online presence and frequent loss of attention in the events around him for the events in his phone or Martha's touch-screen easel.

The episode suggests that events of emotional stress reveal something about the tearing fabric of reality, "It's not real, is it? At Mark's wake, I sat there thinking it's not real. The people didn't look real, their voices weren't real" (00:09:24,960--00:09:29,320). The moment of extreme grief and melancholia stemming from loss traverses an otherwise abysmal gap between affect and technology, where the virtual once again becomes the becoming, mediated by loss and technic. Martha's acquaintance Sarah not only voices this but also becomes

the turning point in the episode by offering Martha another way to deal with her loss, though not very differently from the targeted advertisement Martha so viciously deletes. "I can sign you up to something that helps...It will let you speak to him. I know he's dead. But it wouldn't work if he wasn't... It's software. It mimics him" (00:12:15,760--00:12:17,960). Martha finds the idea 'obscene', just as the Frankensteinian monster is found to be 'profane'. However, she soon finds herself lonely and pregnant, and already being 'signed-up' to the unique service, she begins to feed the 'monster' parts of Ash's public online body which is aplenty since he was an active and "heavy user" and has tweets and Facebook posts. The AI Ash begins to form and soon Martha is hooked, providing him with more parts to perfect it, including audio and video files, private data. AI Ash can now talk and unlike Victor Frankenstein, the creator who was repulsed by the monster he created, Martha is intrigued and even obsessed. In the 2015 film, *Victor Frankenstein*, one finds Martha's double, another contemporary Frankenstein who seeks to create a monster to overcome or as he says "balance" the loss of his brother, Henry Frankenstein. This loss experienced by Victor in his youth prompts him to take matters of creation, life, death and destruction into his own hands. There is an almost parallel exploration of the experience of death by the living in both these contemporary re-imaginings of *Frankenstein*. However, Victor loses his fascination much more quickly than Martha when he beholds the monster in flesh. In a comparative analysis, it is clear that Martha's interaction with the AI Ash is mediated through media, information generated from social media, and technology that is already deeply and openly interspersed in her life and hence, the monster, the AI Ash does not appear grotesque to her in the sense that it does to Victor. Victor's monster is physically very different from the AI Ash. It has its beginning in a homicidal, animalistic homunculus and even when he tries a second attempt to make it in his "image", the monster is an excess—an excess which comes from the original text and carries the multitude of interpretation or as Salotto puts it "there will always be an excess of meaning (embodied in the creature) that upsets the notion of a unitary identity, thereby disturbing the notions of origins or closure"—with a larger frame, two hearts, two pairs of lungs, a flat head (just because Victor likes it so) (199). It is surprising then that it is revealed later in his meeting with this now live monster that he always expected a brother, a strange emotional reaction from this 'mad but scientific genius' who beholds a figure who neither recognizes Victor nor feels anything for anyone around him.

"Be Right Back" bypasses this concern, this lack of emotive aspect of the monster in *Victor Frankenstein* which if one compares to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is misplaced for Shelley's creation has feelings and desires, by an AI that looks human, though unsettlingly flawless, more perfect than its human image, and is capable of humane emotions, kinder, sympathetic...a quick learner of what it would mean to be the human it mimics, a mimicry of the perfect image that one portrays of oneself online. While Victor's monster is an organism that suggests its cyborg identity and "is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities" (Haraway 71), the AI Ash complicates the

idea of ‘human’ by the obviousness of its cybernetic organicity, an obviousness that is both expected and accepted due to it being an application, a software service that one can sign-up for. However, there is a sense of dread portrayed in the scenes beginning with the actual embodiment of the AI when a plain manufactured ‘body’ is sold to Martha as part of the next “level” of the app. In a scene reminiscent of expandable water toys or ‘grow monsters’, especially ‘Grow a Boyfriend Toy’ that is often advertised and sold online, android Ash is created by the embodiment of the virtual, AI Ash. There is something uncanny in its perfect appearance, but Martha does not spurn him and neither treats him like her creation, unlike Victor whose aim is to create life and be the proclaimed ‘creator’ of life. She is looking for her partner she can keep in secret and not a scientific discovery which would grant her fame, and so she accepts the android but at the same subconsciously compares it to Ash, her partner whom she has lost. She is looking for a replacement but for her a perfect replacement should have the imperfections, the flaws and the personality traits of Ash that were not necessarily portrayed in his digital presence. In its perfection, android Ash doesn’t have these. Martha has sex with the android who does not have a record of Ash’s sexual responses but can “turn that on and off pretty much instantly” and emulates pornographic videos it can access online (00:33:53,240-00:33:58,400). Android Ash doesn’t need to eat or have sex but can do if the “administrator” desires. As Martha finds out, he won’t fight or argue unless she commands and, as the episode progresses, when she tries to destroy it, will even jump off a cliff if that is what she desires. Android Ash is a programmed cyborg, a figure of what Haraway calls the “post-gender world”—the android that is delivered is like a plain doll and all the details (including appearance, gender and sexuality) that make it Ash are programmed on to it—but this fluidity and incompleteness that makes android Ash a possibility also unnerves Martha as she, unknowing of her own cyborg status, still clings to the idea of an “organic wholeness” that is now only available in the ghost of Ash, her memories of Ash that are mediated through time and technology even without the AI and the android.

At the end of the episode, after a time skip during which Martha’s daughter is born and is growing up, it is revealed that just like Ash’s mother used to put photographs of dead family members in the attic, Martha has not destroyed the android but placed it in the attic. The android is equated with photographs of lost ones, a fragment of a presence stuck in time and yet it lives, continuing to defy the two-dimensional frame it has been designated into. Martha and Ash’s daughter, probably even more accustomed to the possible newer developments of their hypertech society which must have taken place in the years the audience is not privy to, neither treats nor imagines android Ash as a photograph, spending and enjoying her time with him. While still not fully accepting in its conclusion, “Be Right Back” might have come the closest to those “lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints” that Haraway talked about in “A Manifesto for Cyborgs” (72).

The unresolved presence of the android reminds one of the Frankenstein myth which continues to make its presence felt and grows in different hands and minds to embody newer concerns of technology, of cyborgs, of the post-human, no doubt, but also always an analysis of what it means to be human and the continuing questions of growing fragmentation and documentation of human life and its data. Lupton suggests,

Like Frankenstein's monster, these personal data are new forms or extensions of human life. More than data doubles or doppelgangers, these personal data have their own liveliness, their own worlds, that exist beyond the purview of the humans who created them. They are constantly changing and moving into new formations. I have elsewhere suggested that we can think of personal digital data as companion species, living with and co-evolving with us. (n. pag.)

## Conclusion

Densen refers to the Frankenstein monster in and across retellings and adaptations as a “serial figure...a stock character of sorts”, that while “a series character exists *within* a series, where he or evolves; the serial figure, on the other hand, exists *as* a series—as a concatenation of instantiations that evolves, not within a homogenous diegetic space but *between* or *across* such spaces of narration” (536). Victor’s monster is one in a series of monsters that fail and are destroyed and then recycled and created again and again at various levels of success mimicking not man’s “image” but also the progression of the Frankenstein myth. Just like the monster is remade every time with new and older parts, the myth too is recreated through the various parts of the serial figure in the numerous appropriations of the myth. Thus, it might not be wrong to say that the myth is as much the Frankensteinian monster in media as is the creature it talks about. Similar to the android Ash who cannot ever be totally relegated as a forgotten photograph in the attic, the myth returns over and over in contemporary ruminations on the human condition in its networked existence.

Both these adaptations can be considered as re/presentations of the Frankenstein myth. It also needs to be acknowledged that both of these adaptations capture the hopes and fears of a postmodern humanist society which is struggling to come to terms with the ever-increasing influence of science and technology in our lives. Therefore, these re/presentations of the Frankenstein myth need to be read as the markers of our society at different times.

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## **THE NEOMONSTERS THESIS: DYSTOPIAS, IDEOLOGIES AND MONSTERS IN *GHOUL* AND *BETAAL***

**Sami Ahmad Khan**

### **Abstract**

This paper studies two Indian dystopias vis-à-vis the monsters stationed within them. It investigates how monsters become metaphors for specific ideologies that threaten public order: it utilizes two Netflix originals as templates for hybridizing dystopias, myths and material realities. Aware of JJ Cohen's seven theses and Luciano Nuzzo's assessment of Foucauldian monsters, it focuses on Patrick Graham's *Ghoul* (2018) and *Betaal* (2020) to ascertain how neo-imperialism, Islamism, nationalism and Naxalism intermesh within constructions of monstrousness. It applies the neoMONSTERS (Mutagenic Ontological Narratives in Space-Time Echoing Realistic Situations) thesis to explicate the fusion of monstrousness, materiality and ideology.

**Keywords :** Dystopia, Monster, neoMONSTERS, Ghoul, Betaal, Ideology, Indian Speculative Fiction

"We live in a time of monsters" ("Preface" vii).

JJ Cohen engages with a twin fixation of naming (i.e. knowing) the monster and disempowering (i.e. domesticating) it in the context of the US, a society that has "created and codified 'ambient fear'" for Massumi, but the ontological state(s) and epistemological construction(s) of monstrousness can be approached as a "mode of cultural discourse" ("Preface" xiii) in other spatiotemporal locations as well. When read vis-à-vis localized socio-political contexts, national anxieties and popular imagination, this ambient fear constructs, projects and interrogates its own milieu and the notions of monstrousness in India –which both "reveals" and "warns". A fascination with the monster emerges: a recalibration of the "total fear that saturates day-to-day living, prodding and silently antagonizing but never speaking its own name" (Cohen viii).

In an India lacerated by crisscrossing, antagonistic ideologies, cultural production manifests monsters not only as "symbolic expressions of cultural unease that pervade a society" (Cohen) but also as the disruptions in/by the national psyche that set limits of/ to behavioural and conceptual normativity

alike. Fuelled by nuclear Pakistan and China in the neighbourhood, India reels under an existential Islamist and Communist threat in/via its dystopias. This underscores Luciano Nuzzo's assessment that the "monsters appear whenever and wherever knowledge/ power assemblages emerge" and "that which eludes the latter, and which threatens to subvert them, is the monstrous" ("Foucault and the Enigma of the Monster" 55). The monsters become bearers of political, religious, social and environmental anxieties, and the spectre(s) of terrorism, whether left-wing or right-wing, emphasizes the colonization – and not mere contouring – of India's popular imagination with a new "aesthetic hegemon" (to borrow terminology from Philip Lutgendorf's "Mahabharata as a Dystopian Future") that evolves its own being.

India's Speculative Fiction (Spec Fic) provides a mutating canvas on which alterity – and its extreme, the monster – is projected across narrative forms. From the Islamist zombies of Mainak Dhar's *Zombiestan* to the mutants of Priya Sarukkia Chabria's *Generation 14*, from the zombie-demons of Jugal Mody's *Toke* to the homo-rakshasas of Arati Kadav's *Cargo*, and from the aliens of Shirish Kunder's *Joker* to the *atripta atma* in Raj and DK's *Stree*, contemporary India's fiction, film and web series exhibit a sustained engagement with the discourse of (hybridized) monstrousness and its imbrication in social and geopolitical/geoeconomical reality. Nalo Hopkinson defines postcolonial Science Fiction as "stories that take the meme of colonizing the natives and, from the experience of the colonizee, critique it, pervert it, fuck with it, with irony, with anger, with humour, and also with love and respect for the genre of science fiction that makes it possible to think about new ways of doing things" (9), the same holds true for dystopian SpecFic. By extension, monstrousness can be understood better when placed within the glocal/ global paradigms of a changing world order.<sup>2</sup> These monsters not only terrorize but also question epistemology of knowledge generation: Bologna finds the Greek τέρας (*téras*) to "indicate something that is an extraordinary sign and therefore monstrous, horrible, and marvelous at the same time"; it not only "signals the infraction of an order" but also "the opening of a hiatus in the order of knowledge" (quoted in Nuzzo 57).

Luciano Nuzzo responds to Foucault's classification of monsters into : juridical-natural monsters marked by "transgression of an interdiction present in law" whether natural or social; moral monsters where "monstrosity does not conform to juridical or moral prescriptions" and "breaks social order"; and, political monsters who "puts the political order into discussion"(64 -69).<sup>3</sup> Their monstrosity is shaped by their 'nature', their 'behavior' or 'conduct' against the social contract, and their political positioning respectively. Since for Nuzzo the political monster is inherently linked with "the transformations of the forms of power", and "all monstrosity is therefore deeply, and inevitably, political", these monsters help foreground the refracted struggles, rising tensions and inherent friction between ideologies in India.

This paper views two horror/ dystopia web series to investigate the inter linkages between contemporary popular imagination (in the throes of right-ward

lurch), cultural production (within its OTT platforms), and the ensuing material realities which necessitate the encoding of ideological and cultural alterity in order to question the generation and reception of knowledge-power. It fuses arguments by Cohen and Nuzzo to introduce a new framework (and lexicon) of the neoMONSTERS, which explicates the monster through a location-specific imbrication of nationalism, hybridization, postcolonialism, socio-political reality and religio-cultural otherization. The neoMONSTERS— Mutating Ontological Narratives in Space-Time Echoing Realistic Situations— places such beings of alterity within their milieu and investigates the ideologies that combine within a syntax and national matrix to render their existence possible.<sup>4</sup> The two (horror/dystopia) Netflix series contain monsters which emerge as sites of engagement where fiction merges with reality, India meets the world, dystopia fuses with the monster, and knowledge combines with power .Edward James argues in “Utopia and anti-utopia” that utopia has not disappeared in the wake of war, genocide and totalitarianism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century but it has “merely mutated... into something very different from the classical dystopia” (219). Since the utopia/dystopia of the “revolutionary model” often meets the “alien/monster SF” of evolutionary mode (Csicsery-Ronay Jr. 110), this paper extends to argument to India’s dystopian web series of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: *Ghoul* and *Betaal*.<sup>5</sup>

### **Arab Monsters in a “NewIndia”: Islamism, Terrorism and Hindu Nationalism in *Ghoul***

The country [India] has changed.  
 Sectarian conflict has reached a crisis point.  
 Secret detention centres are established.  
 A military clampdown is in effect.

— *Ghoul*

If monsters are “breaker[s] of category” for JJ Cohen, dystopias, by extension, can be called as breakers of temporal, political and moral normativity (through their disruptions). Patrick Graham’s *Ghoul* (2018) is set in a right-leaning India of the near future: an Orwellian state clamps down heavily on suspected terrorists after a spate of attacks and crackdowns become the norm. Civil liberties are curtailed; books are burnt; people are picked up from their homes and sent to reconditioning camps. A standard, state-sponsored syllabus is taught; intellectuals are routinely rounded up; and loaded words like “anti-nationals” and “beef” are strategically inserted in the narrative.

This can be read as a result of India’s response to Pakistan’s state-doctrine of making India “bleed from a thousand cuts”, which, as per Pervez Hoodbhoy, now lies in ruins (“Bleed”). Jihadism as an instrument of Pakistan’s foreign policy is mirrored by Islamophobia as a domestic policy across the Radcliffe Line. A special force called the National Protection Squad (NPS) is raised in *Ghoul*: it is a security agency with a broad counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism mandate. With rampant Islamist terror and Islamophobia feeding into each other, bigotry

and fundamentalism rule, and a massive propaganda campaign is unleashed to flush out the “traitors within”. The Indian Muslims are shown as being under threat (since *they* are seen as a threat to the state), and are depicted as subversives: a character even remarks their entire “race is filthy”. It is not just the blood-and-gore narrative of horror-dystopia that makes Naahar exclaim: “*Ghoul* is scary, yes, but for entirely different reasons than you’d anticipated. Like *Fahrenheit 451*, we witness Muslim literature being burned, their religious artefacts are declared contraband, and their voices clamped down with cries of ‘sedition!’” (“*Ghoul*”). The perception of (Muslim) minorities as terrorists, foreign invaders, and by extension, monsters— who are made to live in “scheduled religions zone” in *Ghoul*— dovetails not just with current geopolitics but even more importantly with the historical bitterness of the two-nation theory (which can be accessed in “The Others”). This can be read in tandem with the assertion that “when in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the state becomes identified with the nation, and political unity became ethno-political unity, the monster was able considered as he who is not recognizable as belonging to the national community” (Nuzzo 65).

A “future-orientation” is central to this web series as it draws on a “historical-projective suspension of disbelief as the real thing” in order to “play with it” (Csicsery-Ronay Jr.) Lt. Nida Rahim is a Muslim NPS cadet, whose “religion makes her a traitor in the eyes of her people, and a pariah in the eyes of the (mostly) Hindu soldiers at the facility” (Naahar). Her interaction with other military personnel, most importantly Major Laxmi Das, underscore her problematic identity. While religious groups appear to be persecuted in this future, the antipathy is more towards Muslims than other minorities. The commanding officer, Lt. Col. Dacunha, has a specific idea of the enemy – religious minorities – that is imprinted on his unit (despite he being one himself). Lt. Col. Dacunha is proud of his Christian heritage; he boasts that during the Portuguese inquisition, his forefathers “hunted” the heretics and those who pretended to be Christians. Moreover, the “scheduled zones” mirror the forced ghettoization of traditionally marginalized communities such as scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in India. A similar kind of arrangement exists in the future, except it is based on religion (and not just caste).

Nida, however, firmly believes in the system to such an extent that she hands over her father (Shahnawaz) –an iconoclast who “instead of teaching the official syllabus, forces his students to ask questions”– to the state, and who is, consequently, transferred to a reconditioning camp. Weeks before she is to be commissioned as an officer in the NPS, she is ordered to report to Meghdoot 31, a covert detention centre built after the “emergency”.<sup>6</sup> This is a claustrophobic “advanced interrogation facility” where “dangerous anti-nationals” are sent, a list that includes “student protestors, opposition party leaders, and religious fanatics”. Since the monster is “an exception that suspends the law...the response to the monster, as a consequence, could only be either outside-law, or violence, *the force of law without law*, or medical cures, or mercy” (Nuzzo 66; emphasis added), those who are brought to detention are perceived as being located outside

the law since they are guilty the moment they are captured— at least in the eyes of the soldiers guarding this Abu Ghraib style prison— and the force of law outside law is brought to bear on them.

The NPS is tasked with breaking Ali Saeed, a recently captured terrorist who instils fear and inspires dread. Ali is usually reticent but often breaks out in ancient Aramaic; he can read the minds of those around him and exhibits no pain or fear despite being subject to harsh treatment. His mere presence flares tempers, leads to mutual suspicion, and results in infighting: he seems to know “secrets” about the people around him. For example, he calls Nidaby a pet-name only her father knew. Nida investigates further, only to be told by a terror-suspect Maulvi (Islamic cleric) about a monster from Arabic folklore: a ghoul. The Maulvi says that anyone can sell their soul to the devil and summon this beast by making a specific symbol; the ghoul assumes the shape of the last person it bit, shows those around “a reflection of our [their] sins” and makes them go mad before killing them. *Ghoul* brings a new kind of knowledge— one which is ancient, and contingent not on science but on (Arab) folklore— though “for Hindus, this entity is a *rakshas* or a *pishach*”. This fusion can be accessed vis-à-vis Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay’s mythologerm that explains “the tendency to continually rework the history of science through the use of the mythic, or to use the mythic as a source of alternative or unknown or advanced science, or to use the mythic as a hinge to elaborate a difference between one kind of sf and another” (Chattopadhyay 437). The mythologerm, by extension, can also elaborate the difference between one kind of Speculative Fiction— especially when seen as the fusion of future history, dystopia and monster— and another. Fred Botting writes on the gothic and Science Fiction that in “the crossings of two generic monsters, monstrosity returns from the past and arrives from the future” (112). Ghoul returns from Arabia’s pre-Islamic past— and the threat of Islamism it metaphorizes emanates from India’s future. With its ever-changing body at odds with that of the state, an identity in state of constant flux, and a diffused positioning, the ghoul becomes a representation of Cohen’s first and fourth thesis: the monster’s body is a cultural body (“Seven Theses” 4) and the monster dwells at the gates of difference (7).

Nida soon realizes that the Meghdoot section is not merely an interrogation facility: it is also a slaughterhouse and her father met his end there. The NPS has been executing prisoners after interrogation even if they turned out to be innocent. Ali, thus, turns out to be a supernatural entity, a ghoul that has been invoked by Nida’s father as revenge against the totalitarian state that deprived him of his life and liberty.<sup>7</sup> The avenging-ghoul, again, plays with the sixth thesis of Cohen: the fear of the monster becomes a kind of a desire since “the linking of monstrosity with the forbidden makes the monster all the more appealing as a temporary egress from constraint” (“Seven Thesis” 16). The ghoul becomes a “strange attractor” for Shahnawaz (and later Nida), an avenger for the marginalized, a sigh of the oppressed.

The ghoul – a guilt-activating catalyst – assumes multiple shapes as the narrative proceeds, sows the seeds of fear and suspicion within a cohesive military unit, destroys its camaraderie, and goes on a killing spree. Nida barely escapes the facility but is immediately taken into custody by a rescue team after she kills Dacunha in full public view (since the ghoul may have taken his shape, or Nida might be punishing Dacunha for his deeds). She then realizes that the (Meghdoot) unit she thought had gone rogue was in fact conforming to state policies and following standard operating procedures. Disillusioned, Nida cuts herself using a hidden blade and engages in a blood ritual to summon the ghoul yet again: the cycle begins a new *a la* Cohen's second thesis, the monster always escapes, always to return ("Seven Theses" 4).

*Ghoul* manifests how speculative traditions from Arab folklore reappear within South Asian dystopias. While the critique of systemic state violence (e.g. Ahmad's family was killed in front of him to make him talk), religious extremism, terrorism, Islamophobia, and Islamist terrorism is evident, ghoul's premise undercuts its superstructure. The wronged Shahnawaz petitions a Ghoul– an *Arab* monster– rather than an Indian *bhoot, pret* or *pisach* to wreak vengeance, a choice that reaffirms Indian Muslims *as* outsiders. Rather than choosing a corresponding monster from the SpecFic traditions of the country/culture/ civilization one resides in– especially when India has a healthy tradition of avenging spirit– Shahnawaz's choice of the avenger remains Arab and not South Asian. The critique of Islamophobia itself emerges as Islamophobic, since the Muslim other would always be an outsider, even in his/ her popular imagination, unless the ghoul *specifically* represents *Islamist* terror (which again makes the narrative Islamophobic, though this time from a different vantage point).

### **Redcoat Zombies in the Red Corridor : Naxalism, Military-Industrial Complex and Neo-imperialism in *Betaal***

If *Ghoul* engages with terrorism, Islamism, and Hindu Nationalism, *Betaal* takes the fight to India's troubled Red Corridor– especially when the nation is haunted by the spectres of Marx (in the Red Corridor) and Mao (along the Sino-Indian border). To cite just two more examples of ideological subversion in contemporary web series : *Leila* features a quasi-fascist India of the 2040s divided along class/ caste/ religious lines and *JL50* does not fail to foreground– though subtly– an imminent 'naxalite' threat in the nation's past.

Cohen avers that the "manifold boundaries (temporal, geographic, bodily, technological) that constitute 'culture' become imbricated in the construction of the monster"; he finds the monster to be "an extreme version of marginalization" that translates as an "abjecting epistemological device basic to the mechanics of deviance construction and identity formation" (ix). The Muslim other (in the popular imagination, also a Pakistani, even, nay, *especially* if Indian) and the communist other (conflated as a Marxist/ Maoist/ Naxalite in the national

psyche) haunt cultural production. To cite just one example of the latter in another narrative form: *Newton* contains a comical reference to the Naxalite insurgents in India's Red Corridor as zombies, which is actualized by Graham's next endeavour.

*Betaalis* an apocalyptic narrative about Redcoat zombies led by an undead Lt. Col. of the East India Company (EIC). Cohen's third thesis, that of the monster being the harbinger of category crisis ("Seven Theses" 6) finds itself activated as SpecFic traditions from the east and the west clash within the same (national/ notional) body: the zombie (in this case, in this case) combines with the betaal (revenant) of Indian folklore. The series begins with a diary entry written by Lt. Col. Lynedoch dated 17<sup>th</sup> June, 1857:

We came to *help these people*. But they resist. The mutiny has reached us. How dare they? I will *use their own guardians against them*. I will harness the Betaal's curse, and grind these savages into the dirt...It seems there are rebels in the tunnel. I must go. (emphasis added)

The White Man's Burden is inherently tied with orientalism, colonialism and imperialism, and manifests similar concerns in the nation's collective psyche. The British officer laments how the 'natives' spurn the offers of help (and civilization) which England brings to India (specifically via the East India Company). Simultaneously, the colonizer is aware of how India's own guardians (and traditions) must be used against the nation: perhaps a metaphor for the education system, which was overhauled by the British to create 'babus' who served the Empire (*a la* Macaulay's minutes).

If *Ghoul* followed the coming-of-age of Nida, *Betaal* follows another young officer who sways between discharging duty and obeying morals. Monsters change at an ontological level— but the epistemology of victimhood remains the same. Deputy Commandant Vikram Sirohi is attached to the elite "Baaz Squad"<sup>8</sup> of the Counter Insurgency Police Department (CIPD) that is tasked with sanitising a "troubled" location. Parallel to East India Company's Lt. Col. Lynedoch, who also inspired hero-worship, this CIPD unit is headed by another charismatic (though corrupt) officer: Commandant Tyagi is secretly on the payroll of a construction company (Surya) that wants to build infrastructure within the *adivasi* (tribal) land to connect the village with the city. This, again, runs parallel to EIC's "development" of a colonial India at the expense of the native: through Lt. Col. Lynedoch (and the Taunton Regiment), the East India Company suppresses the "natives" (Indians) under the guise of "development"; Surya Construction corporation of the present "hires" the CIPD to suppress the natives (tribals) under the pretence of developing a highway.

As the construction company rushes to meet state deadlines (the CM is supposed to inaugurate the construction of highway within a few hours), the fight between the tribals protesting their dislocation and state forces echo similar concerns ripped from newspaper headlines: the invasion of forests and tribal habitats by corporations (for mining and infrastructure development) dislocate

the forest-dwellers and cause irreparable damage to the ecosystem (refer to Areeparampil and Oskarsson for details). The (tribal) villagers feel that the opening of the tunnel would liberate what lies imprisoned within.

During India's first war of independence in 1857, the Taunton regiment, a particularly vicious British unit, was trapped by Indian resistance fighters in a tunnel under Betaal Mountain, where Indian folklore posited a betaal to reside. The entire unit was killed in action but the Lt. Col. (Lynedoch) appropriated the power of the betaal to become immortal: he now lies in wait for a human sacrifice to escape his tomb and conquer India. Lynedoch, thus, becomes the betaal and his zombie army waits to be break out of the prison: a goal in which it is unwittingly (and later consciously) assisted by the Surya Construction Corporation. When Nuzzo declares that the monster "is always captured within a scientific, philosophic, or juridical discourse" but also acknowledges that its body always exceeds "the discursive forms of its conceptualization" since the "hybrid that the monster incarnates consigns it to a liminal space" (57), the meeting of EIC and Surya Corporation, zombie and betaal, imperialism and capitalism, become those liminal spaces that challenge their own existence.

As the monster "polices" the borders of the possible for Cohen's fifth thesis ("Seven Theses" 12), the physical boundaries of the tunnel must have remained "undefiled" – despite any attempts on part of the Surya Corporation to open the tunnel and build a road through it, or the Taunton desire to break free of their cage. The protesting villagers come out in numbers to protect the tunnel and Surya Corporation requests the CIPD to deploy the Baaz Squad. There is a second layer of ideological subversion: the tribals would be declared as armed Naxalites and neutralized. An agent provocateur of Surya detonates a bomb near a tense stand-off between the villagers and the Baaz Squad, for which the tribal 'naxals' are ultimately blamed, thereby evincing a brutal, knee-jerk CIPD counter-offensive.

The fighting intensifies and the state forces sanitise the area: the tribal village near the 'Betaal mountain' is razed to the ground. For Cohen, "the monster haunts; it does not simply bring past and present together, but destroys the boundary that demanded their twinned foreclosure" (ix-x). Construction begins but some workers are killed by an unknown entity that lies within the tunnel: the Baaz squad personnel who are asked to investigate are also attacked. The Baaz Squad suffers losses as zombie soldiers storm out of the tunnel and go on a killing spree. The survivors retreat to an old British barracks and fortify their positions until it dawns that Lt. Col. Lynedoch-cum-Betaal entity can "possess" anyone: it now controls Commandant Tyagi (whose hair has turned white) and manipulates her to do its bidding.

While the ghoul ingests its victims and takes their form, the betaal can possess humans or have them devoured by a zombie horde it controls. Developing on the flux of ghoul– or Ali Saeed– which was able to assume any shape and resists the state in a way that no one ever has (or can), betaal– or Lt.

Col. Lynedoch— of this series can control humans. This is parallel to Cohen's argument that “the monster is best understood as an embodiment of difference, a breaker of category, and a resistant Other known only through process and movement, never through dissection-table analysis” (*Monster Theoryx*). The ghoul and the betaal keep changing their identities despite their malevolent beings, and this movement make them even more dangerous. The ghoul kills the suspected Islamist terrorists and the military personnel with equal indifference—and panache— and the betaal similarly wreaks havoc on the state forces and protesting tribals alike.

The tribals and the state forces decide to fight back together using weapons and tribal forms of knowledge. As those bitten start “turning” into zombies (such as Haq, another reference to the Islamist zombie, or the Muslim outsider who can “turn” at any moment against those it is supposed to guard), protagonists face the same ethical dilemmas which zombie narratives dictate. Ultimately, Lynedoch possesses Sirohi but the latter fights back, driven by his guilt at having killed a little girl under Tyagi’s orders. However, if the ghoul used guilt to turn people against each other, it is guilt that redeems Sirohi in *Betaal*. In an attempt to defeat the betaal (Sirohi wants the tunnel to be razed to the ground), the living end up destroying betaal’s prison instead, allowing its curse to plague the land. The first season ends with British ghost ships appearing off the coast of Mumbai—and zombie attacks being reported from all over the country.

*Betaal* pits a set of dialectical forces against each other: first, in terms of nationality, it projects a (colonizing) British versus (colonized) India conflict twice (once in 1857 and then the one in our immediate future with British warships preparing to attack India); secondly, in terms of rural versus urban divide as it locates the city and the village as two distinct spaces about to be connected through a tunnel/ road which then becomes a source of woe since it is the centre which decides the epistemology of this connection. The third opposition is seen between the forest/ village dwellers (humans) versus the military-industrial complex (machine) as represented by forces (CIPD) and the corporations (Surya). The fourth binary is mapped along the living (tribals and CIPD alike) versus the dead (zombies and those bitten). Between these paradigms, identities keep switching sides depending on which ideology controls them at that point. This, again, corresponds to how the shape-shifting ghoul/ betaal reflects that “even before being a product of a device of knowledge/ power, the monster is the materialization of a space of experience in which thought tests its own limits” (Nuzzo 56). Even the betaal, which possesses people in succession (and hence changes shapes), tests the limits of its own ontology— of the zombie and the revenant— and becomes a consolidation of Cohen seventh thesis, the monster stands at the threshold...of becoming (“Seven Thesis” 20). The teleological movement, however, could be one towards Adorno’s negative dialectics: genocide— of the monstrous *mand* the human— can become the ultimate truth for the ghoul and the betaal.

### The neoMONSTERS Thesis : Ghoul and Betaal

The vicious cycle of terror threats and knee-jerk state responses, the constantly shifting identity of the monster, and the cyclical invocations in *Ghoul* manifest patterns of recurrence; the contiguous existence of a paranormal deity as a protector and ravisher alike in *Betaal* further disrupt any ideological stability. Despite (or primarily because of) the ontological underpinnings of the monsters contained therein, *Ghoul* and *Betaal*, with their dystopian settings and technologized and centralized polities, reveal what current praxis conceals— the dystopias in the present. The respective monsters— ghoul and betaal— are shaped by their ‘nature’, their ‘conduct’ and their political subversion alike: they become juridical-natural monsters (whose biological ‘nature’ harms those around), moral monsters (as their ‘conduct’ breaks social order), and political monsters (as they underscore dominant/ emergent ideologies) in simultaneity— and not just as a mere progression over a time-scale.

The neoMONSTERS thesis scans *Ghoul* and *Betaal* for their inherent monstrousness: the monsters within these web series, when viewed alongside (resisting) ideologies that operate within specific spatiotemporal locations become sites and processes that warn and reveal. The mutating and mutagenic ontological beings of these monsters— and the narratives in which they are imbricated— exists in a liminal space between socio-political exigencies and popular imagination. Their particulars could be accessed below.

<b>Text</b>	<b><i>Ghoul</i></b>	<b><i>Betaal</i></b>
Location of the dystopia (space-time)	India, 2040	India, Immediate Future
Civilizational origin of the Monster	Pre-Islamic Arabia (myth/folklore)	India (myth/folklore)
Procedural hybridization	Ghoul + Rakshas/ Piscach	Betaal + Zombies
Monster’s (and Monstrous) Ideology	Islamism, Islamist Terrorism	Naxalism, neo-imperialism
Source of threat (to public order and the nation)	External (Islamist terrorism)+Internal (Indian Muslims)	External (neo-imperialism) + Internal (forest dwellers and Naxalites)
Opposing Force (to the Monster)	National Protection Squad (NPS)	Counter Insurgency Police Department (CIPD)
Classification of the Force	Military	Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF)
Protagonist with torn loyalties	Lt. Nida Rahim is torn between her minority identity and her duty as an NPS officer.	Deputy Commandant Vikram Sirohi is caught between his respect for Commandant Tyagi (and her orders) and the ethos of uniform (and his morals).

One wonders why the primary ‘forces’ of resistance to the monster are represented by Indian military in *Ghoul* and by the Central Armed Police Forces or CAPFs (as opposed to local police) in *Betaal*. The Indian military operates under the Ministry of Defence and responds to external aggression; the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs) work under the aegis of the Ministry of Home Affairs and handle internal disturbances (among other things such as border management); and the state police functions under the supervision of state governments and handle law and order(*Annual Report 1*). As per its organisational structure, *Ghoul’s* NPS is a wing of India’s military (most probably a special operations group); and in *Betaal*, the structure and mandate of CIPD parallels that of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) which is a CAPF deployed within the Red Corridor to handle left-wing extremism. By utilizing dystopia and monstrousness, authoritarianism and horror, and military and CAPFs, the two Netflix originals may problematize contemporary reality but simultaneously end up reinforcing the stereotypes or regressive strains of national psyche they ostensibly seem to indict. For example, as evidenced by the ranks (Lt. Col., Major, Lt.) in the narrative, *Ghoul’s* Islamism is a matter of concern for the military (which is meant to deal with external threats)—the implicit assumption is that Islam(ism) is primarily an *external* threat. However, the zombies in *Betaal*, which fuse two distinct paradigms (foreign zombie and indigenous betaal) require a CAPF response (ranks such as Commandant and Deputy Commandant are used by CAPFs) –this renders the threats to national security from within (down grading even neo-imperialism and military-industrial complex to an ‘internal’ matter).<sup>9</sup>

As I argue in *Star Warriors*, the trajectory of India’s fictional futures—dystopian visions included—is shaped by the behavioural patterns precipitated by the (global) market forces (e.g. neo-imperialism/ MIC), localised right-wing powers predicated on a religio-cultural reassertion (e.g. Hindu nationalism and Islamist fundamentalism), and a radical, left-liberal resistance to the previous two (e.g. naxalism) (31). While both series deploy horror-and-occult tropes set within India’s totalitarian, dystopian tomorrows, *Ghoul* manifests the recurring intermeshing of mindless terrorism and brutal state responses, and *Betaal* indicted the military-industrial complex and neo-imperialism that lacerate India’s downtrodden populaces etc. The message in both the narratives is clear : we may live in a time of monsters, but more often than not, the monsters-are-us.

## Notes :

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<sup>1</sup> This paper neither studies the evolutionary trajectory of the dystopia nor delves into the monster as a theoretical framework. It also does not “apply” Cohen’s seven theses or Foucault’s categorization of the monster (as per Nuzzo) to narratives. Instead, it distils the spirit that “possesses” monstrousness to observe how monsters/ dystopias intermesh within India’s contemporary reality and builds on the neoMONSTERS thesis.

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- <sup>2</sup> This paper is not concerned whether *Ghoul* or *Betaal* are Science Fiction or not– it views them as dystopias that contain monsters.
- <sup>3</sup> See Nuzzo for more: “in the modern age, at the end of the 18th century, the juridical-natural monster is slowly substituted by the moral monster” (65). While Foucault traces the mutation of monster from one form to another with the passage of time (that is, from juridical-natural to moral etc.), this paper consciously sidesteps the evolution of the monster, undercuts the temporality of such an enterprise, and highlights how India’s monsters of 21<sup>st</sup> century conflate the three Foucauldian categories of monstrousness.
- <sup>4</sup> The neoMONSTERS thesis emanates from the ‘IN situ Model’ of Indian SpecFic as proposed in *Star Warriors of the Modern Raj*.
- <sup>5</sup> It is aware that the three dominant paradigms of Science Fiction’s (and thus SpecFic’s) future history – revolution, evolution and dispersion (Csicsery-Ronay Jr. 110)–often crossbreed, this paper treats the point of convergence of the monster/dystopia dispositif as a logical ingress point into contemporary materiality.
- <sup>6</sup> This may refer to an external threat (such as a nuclear war) or domestic strife. It also connects the past with the future by containing shades of the emergency declared by former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi under article 352, a state of authoritarian terror which lasted from 1975-77.
- <sup>7</sup> This also explains why Nida was called to Meghdoot 31 in the first place. A captured terrorist (Ali Saeed) had whispered her name to an arresting officer.
- <sup>8</sup> Baaz, literally hawk in Hindi, can refer to CRPF’s ‘CoBRA’ (Commando Battalion for Resolute Action) units, which are special forces deployed in jungles for asymmetric warfare.
- <sup>9</sup> This manifests a tendency to see the Muslim other as the ultimate enemy sans frontiers.

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# HUNGER, REPRESENTATION, AND THE GORKHALAND MOVEMENT

**Samiran George Ghissing**

## Abstract

This paper will analyze representations of the Gorkhaland Movement in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2005), Satyadip S. Chhetri's "Beyond Sausages and Poached Eggs" (2013) and Purna Rai's "Declaration of a Revolution" (1996). I argue that in these texts the writers posit hunger as the incipient cause for the demand of the Gorkhaland Movement. The hunger is of two kinds: a natural hunger--the continual concern is economic deprivation--and a metaphorical hunger--a hunger for an identity. An identity that is at once Indian and a reflection of the hybrid existence as Indian-Nepali while trying to overturn the "foreigner" tag that is associated with the Indian-Nepalis in India. While tracing the food imagery it becomes clear that the meta-languages of food in these narratives reveal consumption as coded expressions of power. The writers through the alimentary symbols create an idiom where hunger isn't just dearth but a language of resistance.

**Keywords :** Literary Food Studies, Gorkhaland Movement, Indian-Nepali, Hunger

Can the hungry go on a hunger strike? Non-violence is a piece of theatre. You need an audience. What can you do when you have no audience? People have the right to resist annihilation.

—Arundhati Roy, Interview, *The Guardian*

The increasing state intervention and diktat on personal consumption and diet in India with the "beef ban" and consequent lynchings in Uttar Pradesh, the refusal to include eggs in the mid-day meal schemes in Madhya Pradesh, and the use of culinary terms like "momo" and "chowmein" as racial epithets against the North Eastern community; food is increasingly being used to shape and define what it means to be an "authentic" Indian citizen. Some citizens are seen as more "Indian" than others; the upper caste, hindu, bourgeois, North Indian male unsurprisingly--yet problematically--serves as the normative subject. The state's role in legitimising or prohibiting certain food harkens back to the age old--caste based--culinary restrictions, constructing a hierarchy through culinary order.

Against the backdrop of such friction, a conversation about eating food and cultures is crucial for minority communities, specifically for this paper, the Indian-Nepali community. The terms “Nepali” and “momo” are symbolically used as a tool for othering and branding the entire North Eastern community as a foreigner. The usage of a foreign nationality (Nepali) and concomitantly its food (momo) reminds us of the inextricable link between food and personal identity. The conflation of the two is emblematic of what it means to be an Indian-Nepali i.e. an other or a foreigner. In the national imaginary there is no such thing as an “Indian-Nepali”, there are no hyphenated citizens, they are invisible. In *Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorising the Diaspora Imaginary*, Vijay Mishra explains the “law of the hyphen” as one in which certain citizens are still fighting to find its place and meaning in the nation state when oppositional values and meaning is ascribed on the hyphenated/non hyphenated status:

In actual practice the *pure*, unhyphenated generic category is only applicable to those citizens whose bodies signify an unproblematic identity of selves with nations. For those of us who are outside this form of ‘universal’ identity politics, whose corporealities fissure the logic of unproblematic identification, plural/ multicultural societies have constructed, for their unassimilable others, the *impure* genre of the hyphenated subject (Mishra 184).

Swatahsiddha Sarkar elaborates this concept in the Indian-Nepali context in *Gorkhaland Movement: Ethnic Conflict and State Response*, where he says that the crux of the problem is the failure to see particular communities needs to be represented in a decolonized nation in a hyphenated manner. Sarkar mentions while “Indian Bihari” or “Indian Bengali” is seen rather meaningless “Indian-Nepali” is always a meaningful category and also oxymoronic as it describes foreign loyalties. The problem arises when one group is seen less of a natural citizen, with a liminality that cannot be afforded. Where the non-hyphenated national is posited across the dubious hyphenated other,

The case of the Nepalis in India unfolds a double edged character of national identity, more as an obvious sequel of Bhabha’s double narrative movement of pedagogy and performative, exemplified through the capacity of defining who is a member of the national community and who is an ‘other/ alien/ foreigner’. To put matters to simple terms, it is proposed that the existence of a national community presupposes the existence of other nations. (Sarkar 45)

I use Mishra and Sarkar’s intervention as an entry point to see the Indian-Nepali as a liminal figure. This liminality results in the characters in the chosen texts being seen as abject figures. I draw from an intertextual understanding of abjection from Kristeva and Butler. For Kristeva the abject has only one quality “that of being opposed to I” where the boundaries of meaning collapse and “it is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva 10-13). Butler’s understanding

of abjection expands upon Kristeva's, where she sees the abject as outside the constitutive of the subject. Who can be deemed a subject and certain bodies' membership to be a subject is foreclosed. The spectacle of hunger and hunger strikes makes visible the abject and "is potentially decentered in moments of self-recognition and self-determination by those who remain abjected by hegemonic racial, gender, and sexual norms, even though they might be occasionally "recognized" or "tolerated" by formal liberal reason" (Butler 64-65) but this "tolerance" is only till they remain docile and non-threatening. The paper seeks to analyse narratives that highlight the Indian-Nepali community and make them visible within the very site of their abjection—the stereotypes, dearth and hunger—to interrogate the power relations they are embedded in, where the minority subjects are rendered strange, foreign and abject to the majoritarian national culture.

Kiran Desai's Booker winning novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2005) is perhaps one of the only popular texts, where the major narrative arc is set in the Darjeeling district, which houses a key portion of the Indian-Nepali community. And is the backdrop of one of the protracted statehood demands, the Gorkhaland Movement. The novel itself met with heavy criticism within the Indian-Nepali community for what was viewed as an unsympathetic look into the movement and its people. However, I argue, the meta-languages of food reveal a discourse of sympathy and the Gorkhaland Movement as a leveller of class generated consumption pattern. Purna Rai's "Declaration of a Revolution" (1996) and Satyadip S. Chhetri's "Beyond Sausages and Poached Eggs" (2013) gives us a glimpse into the material reality of the "common man" and the "hungry" characters' dilemma over the need for economic sustenance or respond to the call for hunger strikes. The pertinent question asked is : "Can the hungry go on a hunger strike?". My epigraph points at the paradoxical nature of hunger strike as a political tool. In a hegemonic structure where the Indian-Nepali has been invisibilised and stand for the abject, how can hunger strikes evoke necessary reaction? How can we see them? Hunger strike is a piece of theatre that demands spectators, and above all it is wielding power through an affective spectacle. When the abject is a symbol of horror and disgust; is violence the only recourse? As Roy comments "people have the right to resist annihilation". A nuanced reading of hunger is essential, the narratives I have chosen highlight multiple understandings of hunger. Hunger not just as dearth or lack but a return to bare life where the rage of hunger can be tapped for political purpose.

Hunger has been used by Levinas to investigate the ethical relation to the Other. To Levinas it is only through the body that hungers, that one can understand the importance of the hunger of the other : "...which one recognizes in giving (as one "puts the things in question in giving")—this gaze is precisely the epiphany of the face as a face. The nakedness of the face is destituteness.\* To recognize the Other is to recognize a hunger. To recognize the Other is to give" (Levinas 75). As the ethics of eating well entails that one has to first enjoy one's bread, know its value and give it up for the other. Giving, not in order to have the

merit of giving, but to understand the meaning behind the sacrifice of one's own hunger, and through one's own hunger understand the hunger of others. There is a cost to pay, it cannot be without sacrifice on the one giving. In the narratives, one sees that the revolution cannot be achieved without sacrifice on both sides of the faction. The hunger of Indian-Nepali characters demand satiation, hence, the texts questions hunger and ultimately articulates hunger not only as a lack, but as a site of negotiation, as hungering for more, and moving towards a rights discourse. The writers also provide a fecund ground to investigate the alterity of the characters rendered invisible in the historical and literary discourse. Since Levinas bases the recognition of hunger, on the affect, the metaphorical hunger is also closely related to the physical one. The metaphorical hunger is the lived reality between the hyphen, "Indian" and "Nepali". The meaning of the hyphen is the identity crisis that plagues the Indian-Nepalis. The writers question the nationalist boundary making based on purity in a geographical/cultural border zone that is Darjeeling district.

Chhetri's short story "Beyond Sausages and Poached Eggs" is set against the contemporary political climate with the rhetoric of non-violence and intermittent hunger strikes and tells the story of an unnamed Indian-Nepali driver of a plantation owner. The story is a first person narrative that self reflexively explores the nature of servitude in the Indian-Nepali working class community and their status in the nation vis-à-vis ethnicity. The narrative isn't driven by a plot but is the narrator's reflection on the Gorkhaland Movement, the cyclic nature of exploitation, and the role of hunger in creating his identity. Rai's "Declaration of a Revolution" tells us the story of another labouring class Indian-Nepali, we aren't provided with his exact profession, it is an interchangeable menial work. Like Chhetri's narrative, the husband isn't named, he lives in dire poverty with his wife and numerous children. The story unfolds as a conversation between the husband and wife. The wife asks him the nature of the political sermons and questions the hunger strikes he is participating in at the cost of their household sustenance. This nightlong conversation delves into an analysis of the nature of "revolution". The story is again set in the present political scenario. *The Inheritance of Loss* has interlinking narratives, chief among which is the love story between Gyan, the Indian-Nepali tutor, and Sai an upper class student of Gyan. Their story unfolds amidst the rising political tensions in the Darjeeling district and is set in the violent stage of the Gorkhaland Movement in the 1980s. The secret budding romance between Gyan and Sai flourish over numerous excursions to restaurants, picnics and dinner. Food that first brought them together ultimately undoes their relationship. Food becomes a sign of their alterity and becomes a conduit for the unfolding human drama.

"Beyond Sausages and Poached Eggs" is an important foray in using food as a metaphor for class oppression and associating it with violence. Chhetri's writing acts as a co-text for the forgotten history of Indian-Nepalis' contribution in the nation making. Where classic historicism fails to include the minority groups and their history, relegating them as the 'other' within the postcolonial

cultural gamut. Chhetri counters this invisibilisation as the short story is replete with documentary style reiteration of the Gorkha contribution in the nation building: from Indian-Nepali freedom fighters like Durga Malla—whose statue is in the garden of the Indian Parliament, Ram Singh Thakuri a soldier in Subhas Chandra Bose's INA who gave musical notation to the patriotic anthem "*Kadam Kadam Badaye Ja*". The first person narrator inserts these snippets of facts into the story line to create a subaltern history, he asserts "we too have grown" and want our own space, a claim to the nation.

The story is relayed to us by a nameless lower class Indian-Nepali character he narrates the story in simple prose "I am 30 years old now. Yet I look 40. I stay in a small hamlet near Darjeeling. It is basically a hamlet made up of tea garden workers. No, I do not own the land; they say it belongs to the tea garden. I am the driver of the Manager and hold a special position among my fellow workers" (Chhetri 1). The character is nameless and metonymically represents the numerous faceless Indian-Nepali working class community. His father was a cook for the "burra sahib"—a designation given to the plantation owner—and had died during the police firing in a Gorkhaland meeting:

When I was four years old I lost my father. He had gone to get sausages from Keventer's in Darjeeling for the then Manager. My mother used to tell me that the earlier *Burra Sahib* loved to have sausages and poached eggs for breakfast. My father was the cook of the Manager's bungalow, and his prized possession; the Manager had filched him from a very famous restaurant in Darjeeling for a bottle of Glenfiddich, the restaurant owner's weakness. Twelve years later on that fateful day, there was a meeting for Gorkhaland in Chowk Bazaar. The crowd got so excited by the Supremo's speech that they were almost ready for action. The cops sensed the tension and opened fire. My father received a bullet to his chest. The packet of sausages still lay clutched in his hand when they brought his body to the police station. The Burra Sahib never got to eat those sausages....I never touched the sausages. I always felt that it was the sausages which took my father's life... (Chhetri 1-2)

Early on sausages is indelibly etched on the narrator's memory as a symbol of violence and class oppression. The manner in which the narrator's father comes to work for the Burra Sahib is described as "filched" that is stolen or bartered as a petty commodity, for a bottle of alcohol, Glenfiddich. Both sausages and whiskey becomes markers of upper class consumption and identity. This juxtaposition of violence and food is repeated in *The Inheritance of Loss* where in a Gorkhaland procession, a peaceful march turns into a violent confrontation with the state machinery, with shots being fired leading to the death of countless protesters and the counter violence against the police. Finally, when the violence settles down the landscape is an image of "the red blood lay over the market road in slick pools mingled with a yellow spread of dal... a messy blur clearing into the silent still image of a spread of food mingled with blood" (Desai 277-278). Both Desai and Chhetri are aware that the basic need for alimentation is the initial cause for the unrest. The juxtaposition of extraordinary violence with the quotidian food imagery visibilizes the state violence against its own people. This

violence and death mark the place as site of abjection and makes Kalimpong an uncanny place. It is important to note that in both the narratives Indian-Nepali community is at the receiving end of the violence. In Chhetri's story the protagonist's father's death may seem co-incidental but for the packet of sausage clutched in his hand implicating the Burra sahib in his death.

In Purna Rai's "Declaration of a Revolution" we witness the main protagonist's dilemma over the dire need for sustenance and the desire to respond to the "declaration of a revolution" he hears in a political rally. The protagonist is representative of the "common man" who unfailingly attends Gorkhaland meetings and speeches thoroughly invigorated only to come home where the economic needs are high and hunger reigns supreme. As his wife scolds him, "Even if you are united and start a revolution, don't start off with a strike. Remember last time we went hungry—will you resort to strike at the cost of keeping the children hungry?...enough, enough, tomorrow our children will not go hungry" (Rai 294-205). He vacillates between the need for food and the need for change. The narrative highlights his inner turmoil and it becomes clear that it isn't just his hunger but his children's as well and the dearth in their future. The dearth is not just the physical dearth but the concomitant death of the possibilities. It is the lack of food for the "heads", "hearts" and "activity", the affect, which is made possible only through economic stability. Desai mentions that economic dearth and hunger brings about predation by institutions, "It was the impoverished who walked the line so thin it was questionable if it existed, an imaginary line between the insurgents and the law, between being robbed (who would listen to them if they went to the police?) and being hunted by the police as scapegoats for the crimes of others. They were the hungriest" (Desai 282).

Physical hunger forms a major rhetoric in the political speeches heard by the narrator in the story and its consequent foreclosures:

Himalayas of this country....each grain of sands, trees and plants is soaked with our own sweat and blood. It holds our painful stories and tales of our progress, and the bitter history of our century is also ingrained here. Oh countrymen! My dear poor and afflicted family! What have gained by this long struggle and developmental war? What have we achieved? Only hardships, persecutions, only struggle. Today we are hungry; today our and your children are naked and hungry—today the breasts of our mothers do not shower us the holy milk tasting like honey. But only gives out a tired sigh.... (Rai 205)

By aligning hunger as a signifying system symbiotic with social, economic and finally political ideologies it gives us an important tool to study it, as both produced by and productive of historical and cultural contexts. In other words, hunger is neither isolated from nor merely symbolic. It is actively generating and an example of what it means to be part of the modern Indian state. One has to be a consumer, by which you become a participant in the capitalist framework and important to the state.

Hungry characters on the other hand are defined by a lack and therefore invisible in the schema of modern consumption and hence notably visible only as a site for exploitation. Even to the Cook—Panna Lal—in *The Inheritance of Loss*, Gyan as a tutor is a strange concept because of the ontology of eating invariably puts him as inferior in intellect. The cook assumed the tutor would be Bengali. Food is creating and signifying intellectual merit:

I thought he would be Bengali".... "Bengalis," said the cook, "are very intelligent."... "It's the fish," the cook said. "Coastal people are more intelligent than inland people."Coastal people eat fish and see how much cleverer they are, Bengalis, Malayalis, Tamils. Inland they eat too much grain, and it slows the digestion—especially millet—forms a big heavy ball. The blood goes to a stomach and not to the head. Nepalis makes good soldiers, coolies, but they are not so bright at their studies. Not their fault, poor things (Desai 73).

The important point here apart from the stereotype is that it reveals the ingrained idea that "you are what you eat". Food isn't just symbolic but is used as an ontological tool to legitimize status throughout the three narratives. Despite the crumbling facade of Cho Oyu and Mon Ami in *The Inheritance of Loss*, the dietary pattern is lavish, colonial, and a reminder of their status as neocolonial master. The ethnic food on the other hand dulls the poor Indian-Nepali inhabitants. Symbolically, it is the dining room which is the first formal setting of "sharing bread" between Gyan and Sai. The act of eating together is anything but a bonding experience, it has contradictory implications as it the beginning of their romance but also portents the immanent failure of their romance. Gyan's in-expertise while eating fancy "western food" with its proper cutlery and etiquette signal his class position. The judge has a recognition/ flashback of his own experience in England with western food and the discomfort; but instead of sympathy this recognition horrifies him, it makes the boundaries between him and Gyan less rigid. So, he goes out of his way to humiliate Gyan to maintain a sense boundary between the classes. The young tutor with his repugnance for all colonial allegiances is made to eat lamb chops with peas, tomato soup, potato and gravy. When Sai and Gyan dine together during their courtship period they briefly forget their differences and loving call each other "momos". Eating momos and calling each other "momo" is described by Desai as the "dumpling stage of love" and the "momo" for them signify love and affection , "mutton in dough, one thing plump and cozy within the other—it connoted protection, affection" (Desai 140). This tender moment replete with affection is again undercut by their eating etiquettes, where Gyan uses hands Sai uses tablespoon, and both notice this difference while embarrassedly trying to ignore it. However, early on the deep cultural and social schism between the two is made clear. Gyan and Sai's social standing interrupts their love affair and food that had brought them closer now becomes to each other a sign of their alterity. As Gyan ruminates and consoles himself that the culinary signification is symptomatic of their different upbringing and outlook in life:

She who could not eat with her hands;...never chewed a *paan* and had not tried most sweets in the *mithaishop*, for they made her retch;...felt happier with so-called English vegetables, snap peas, French beans, spring onions, and feared—feared—*loki*, *tinda*, *kathal*, *kaddu*, *patrel* and the local *saag* of the market. Eating together they had always felt embarrassed—he, unsettled by her finickiness and her curbed enjoyment, and she, revolted by his energy and his fingers working the dal, his slurps and smacks. The judge ate even his chapattis, his *puris* and *paranthas*, with knife and fork (Desai 176)

As Gyan and Sai's romantic bubble cracks the political unrest impinges upon their lives, the Gorkhaland posters proliferate the landscape, ranging from “we are stateless” to “we are constitutionally tortured. Return our land from Bengal”. Marx positsthis gnawing need of hunger as “a natural need; it therefore needs a nature outside itself, and object outside itself, in order to satisfy itself, to be stilled. Hunger is an acknowledged need of my body for an object which exists outside it, indispensable to its integration and to the expression of its essential being” (Ellman 32). Marx is talking about physical hunger as well as what I call metaphorical hunger; which is a mixture of affect and need. The demand is for recognition of the hybrid status of the Indian-Nepalis. It isn't just about self articulation but how others view you as well. This hungering can be satiated only through action. Rather than ignoring this affective hunger and focusing only on the physical hunger, it is the combination of both which is articulated, in what it means to be a hyphenated subject—to be an Indian-Nepali. Both kinds of hunger in all the three texts aren't just about sustenance but also of satisfaction, it moves towards remedying wrong.

In “Beyond Sausages and Poached Eggs” the narrator mentions how the “Gorkha” in him was created. It is on his trip to Kolkata where he is introduced by the Burra sahib as his “Man Friday”—which has racist connotations derived from Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, the primitive man, the popular stereotype of the loyal Gorkha servant/soldier. A stranger in the city asks him “where I was from” and then more explicitly “where in Nepal my home was” this casual branding as foreigner is implicit in the construction of the national imaginary, there is constriction on who it conferred as an “authentic” citizen and consequently who isn't. The identity crisis of the Indian-Nepalis is when the term Nepali has connotation of nationality over ethnicity. This innocuously asked question is however loaded with meanings; it elicits “origins” and relegates the protagonist to “margin”. He is marked as a stranger and Butler calls it as being marked as “unreal”, this unreality is a violence in itself, “whose lives are real? How might reality be remade? Those who are unreal have, in a sense, already suffered the violence of derealization” (Butler 33) and this “derealization” of the other means that they are neither citizens nor foreigners, subjects nor objects and exist as abject beings.

The political speech in Desai's text in chapter Twenty Six again discusses hunger, describing the India-Nepali's continuous oppression from the colonial to the neo-colonial one. The government's apathy and under development of the

region, while simultaneously plundering its natural resources—from tea, timber, soil, hydroelectricity etc.—is highlighted. The Indian-Nepali community assert themselves as they try to negotiate their right to the place, claiming that this is “where our parents were born, where our grandparents were born. We will run our own affairs in our own language...” and warns the Gorkha soldiers to leave their service from the Indian army that just uses them “Please quit the army at once. For when you will be retired then you may be treated as a foreigner” (Desai 158-160). From the want of rights and recognition of their heritage to highlighting the difference from the mainstream Bengal state, which founds their demand for a new statehood:

In 1947, brothers and sisters, the British left granting India her freedom, granting the Muslims Pakistan, granting special provisions for the schedule castes and tribes, leaving everything taken care of ...Except us. EXCEPT US. The Nepalis of India. At that time, in April of 1947, the Communist Party of India demanded a Gorkhasthan, but the request was ignored...We are labourers on the tea plantations, coolies dragging heavy loads, soldiers. And are we allowed to become doctors and government workers, owner of tea plantations? No! We are kept at the level of servants...In our own country, the country we fight for we are treated like slaves. Everyday the lorries leave bearing away our forests, sold by foreigners to fill the pockets of foreigners. Everyday our stones are carried from the riverbed of the Teesta to build their houses and cities. We are labourers working barefoot in all weather, thin as sticks, as they sit fat in managers' houses with their fat wives, with their fat bank accounts and their fat children going abroad. Even their chairs are fat... (Desai 158-160)

The political rhetoric in the novel flips the position of the native and the foreigner, where now the Bengalis are seen as the outsiders. Hungry characters and their hunger is articulated as the true forbearers of the soil while the “fat outsiders” are known only for their cannibalising appetite. An appetite marked by excessive consumption that drains the area and its people of natural resources and sustenance. The separatist movement is vehemently opposed by the upper class characters who want to maintain the status quo. Lola and Mrs Sen, the Bengali sisters, launch into prejudiced tirades as words like “illegal immigration” and “anti-national” enters the text. This anti-national rhetoric turns more vulgar with the obvious colluder of anti-nationalism, Muslims, ““And then, *baba*, the way these *Neps* multiply” Mrs Sen: “Like Muslims” “No self control, those people disgusting”” (Desai 129). The Gorkhaland movement that was/ is a grassroots movement attempts to makes visible the starving body absent from everywhere and tolerated only when docile and invisible. The very moment Indian-Nepalis vocalise their grief and dissent they interrupt the imaginary segregated world in *The Inheritance of Loss*.

The symbolic order is disrupted and the abject bodies become a threat. The invisible body and its hunger are no longer invisible and becomes threatening to the elite upper class society. The result is an immediate backlash upon the bodies by state machinery and tirades fill the novel: how dare “these *Neps*” demand

rights and usurp “our” space. Hence, the use of violence on the Gorkhaland protesters, in all the texts is the culmination of the entire nexus of power that was armed and ready to remove them from public sphere to make them invisible again. Butler uses the term “unreal”, however, the abject bodies have a spectral quality to it. What does it mean to use violence against unreal bodies? Is that violence unreal as well? The key analysis that Butler states is the double negation, a symbolic process, where even at the site of “unrealness” and abjection, the abject bodies exist spectrally. Hence, they have to be negated again and again. The impulse is to quell the movement and quell it continuously because even though they are abject, they continue to be present at the very site of their abjection. As long as “I” exists the “Other” exists as well. As long as economic inequality and inequity is present the character’s hunger persists. The hunger keeps the Indian-Nepalis radical and disavows forgetting. Hunger acts as a way of remembering and contesting erasure.

The rallying calls of the Gorkhaland Movement is heard and interrupts the upper class privilege in specific sites: firstly, in the high end restaurant Glenary’s a symbolic marker of excess consumption, and secondly, the library, a site of education and learning that is foreclosed to many working class Gorkha community. After witnessing Gyan in the Gorkhaland procession Sai is unsettled and on her return journey symbolically throws up the fancy restaurant food, the sick is interestingly called mulligatawny—a hybridized food, a remnant of the colonial legacy. This is an important mark as it is at this juncture, of her own abjection—Kristeva mentions vomit as another site of horror and the inner/outer obfuscates—that she starts introspecting about her class privilege and “self-centeredness”.

The hallmark of any successful revolution is the levelling of social hegemony, while the Gorkhaland movement didn't result in a separate state for the Indian-Nepalis, it did lead to carving the territory out as an autonomous region within Bengal. In the novel these gains are symbolically shown through the levelling of consumption patterns. In Desai's novel, the first chapter begins with the “rebels” inserting themselves in the routine of the afternoon tea, the judge sits crossly demanding “a cake or scones, macaroons or cheese straws” from the cook. Their afternoon tea is interrupted, when the rebels invites themselves to the tea and demand snacks to satiate their hunger. While the short stories delve into unveiling the hungry body as a spectacle, in the novel, the hungry characters demand to be fed. As a final insult they defecate in the toilet without flushing marking the consumption, and then the scatological, this act is subversive and symbolic. The boundary between the inner and outer is confounded by those excremental passages in which the inner effectively becomes outer. The excreting function becomes a symbolic way through which forms of identity-differentiation are blurred. (Butler 170)

In one swift act the episode becomes a thorn in the judge's mind as he is made to wait on the lower class Gorkhaland supporters and then symbolically becomes the other. Even Bengali sisters realize that the political unrest “didn’t

*come from nothing,*" and calls it an old feeling of anger that couldn't be divorced from Kalimpong, "It was part of every breath....It did matter, buying tinned ham roll in a rice and dal country; it did matter to live in a big house...it did matter to fly to London and return with chocolates filled with kirsch; it did matter that others could not" (Desai 242). The division of the upper and the lower, the hungry and the satiated the "inner" and "outer" worlds of the subject, this boundary becomes fragile as the local shops stop selling the Bengali sisters food, they in turn become the hungry ones and has to rely on her Indian-Nepali maid to purchase necessary food items. Even in Cho Oyu except little food that Sai buys when possible, it is their garden that feeds them. For the first time in their life, they sample and eat the local cuisine:

For the first time, they in Cho Oyu were eating the real food of the hillside. *Dalda saag*, pink-flowered, flat-leaved; *bhutiya dhaniya* growing copiously around the cook's quarter; the new tendrils of squash or pumpkin vine; curled *ningro* fiddleheads, *churbi* cheese and bamboo shoots sold by women who appeared from behind bushes on forest paths with cheese wrapped in ferns and the yellow slices of bamboo shoots in buckets of water. After the rains, mushrooms pushed their way up, sweet as chicken and glorious as Kanchenjunga. (Desai 281-282)

The blockade and strikes reveal that the nature of the consumption pattern, the boundary drawn and maintained for the purposes of social regulation and control is in fact a fragile construct. Even nature aids and abets the "insurgents" as the heavy monsoons had caused landslides divorcing the hills from the main state and all the shops remained closed as there was a halt in the supply coming from the plains. It is also nature that serves as an example for Rai's protagonist who answers his wife's question "Really tell me what all happened, Every day you say "meeting, meeting", by this meeting we do not get enough to eat. So many children—you must think—for others it is not a problem but it is difficult for the poor like us. Now the children are small, what will happen when they'll grow up?" (Rai 204). He ponders over the dilemma over family duties and duty toward the community and the Gorkhaland Movement. The protagonist claims to understand the meaning of a revolution: which is not "fights, violence and all that" but as in the distance dawn approaches and a rooster crows he declares "Do you hear, this is a revolution, for a cock to crow is a revolution, understood?"(Rai 208). Rai's narrator aligns the Marxian call of the labour revolution as natural phenomena, a rising up of the labour to sustained inequity. He articulates revolution and hunger as the reality of being. He identifies hunger not as a void but a fecund site. One with transgressive powers, that can be harnessed as a political tool. Even the performative aspect of the hunger strikes seen as "playing politics", is to be read, not as a pejorative "play" but as participating in the larger political process of the country. Moving from objects to subjects. Hunger acts as a symbol of neglect as well as an agent of change.

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## **THE PASTORAL POWER DIALECTIC : A FOUCAULDIAN READING OF *THE SLAYER SLAIN***

**Mini M Abraham**

### **Abstract**

*The Slayer Slain*, a novel published in *Vidya Sangrah*, the CMS College magazine in 1864, holds a unique position in 19<sup>th</sup> century Indian literature in English as the first missionary novel written by a woman. Set in nineteenth century Travancore, the native Syrian Christian characters seen through the missionary lens appear shallow and ritualistic. The benign solution to all crises proposed in the novel is to turn away from everything perceived as native and thus fallacious, to traverse the salvific path outlined by the Western Protestant Missionaries. Although the novel appears to manifest the humane and benign side of colonialism, this paper argues that it actually exemplifies Foucault's pastoral power and good shepherd model of governance. The essential aim of such power is "salvation of the flock", through the "power of care" using a spiritual trajectory. Pastoral power acts as an "individualizing power" wherein each individual within the flock is guided with a proper model of rectitude and penitence to act in ways which are for "their own good", a good which, on their behalf is decided by another. This willing transformation and remodelling the 'self' into a western protestant model, points to a manipulative power which ultimately results in the making of a fragmented, uneasy self, dependent upon the emancipatory potential of the colonizer's religion to make sense of one's life.

**Keywords:** The Slayer Slain (Novel), Nineteenth Century literature, Pastoral Power, Syrian Christians, Western Protestant ideology, good shepherd model of governance.

### **Introduction : The Missionary and Colonial Presence in South India**

In order to take stock of the impact of Christian missionaries in 19<sup>th</sup> century India, it takes a nuanced understanding of the history and influence of colonialism and of colonial modernity. Bellenoit reports that Anglican missionaries were allowed by the British government to enter the Company territories first in 1813 and later in 1833. According to him, there was a general consensus among missionaries that Christianity, western scholarship and European civilization were all intertwined and that these should be implemented in the colonies (25). He further points out that due to such beliefs, the missionary

engagements in India were initially confrontational in approach. At an ideological level, Christianity in the nineteenth century was closely interlinked with the expansion of colonial power and its influence in the world. Missionaries wanted to win adherents to their spiritual as well as worldly empires. No conflict was seen by them between the priorities of the world and the other-worldly empires. Dilip Menon points out that the 19<sup>th</sup> century imperial state was “mirrored and informed by a British Protestant spiritual empire” (1673). Thus, the missionaries exerted a kind of parallel governing influence in conjunction with the colonial masters.

While the colonial masters were primarily interested in capitalist endeavours and allied political activities, the missionary presence was more complex. Evangelical Christianity saw inequality and superstition as the defining features of the indigenous societal structure, which generated assent among some groups and revivalist dissent among others. Missionary rhetoric posited the idea that all individuals should be subjected equally before the rule of law. But the abstract idea of the individual was presumed to be within a well defined hierarchy. While the caste system subordinated the individual within the community, missionary rhetoric harped on a “new community based on equality and brotherhood in Christ” (Menon 1674).

### **Situating *The Slayer Slain* among 19<sup>th</sup> Century Indian Literature in English**

During the 19th century, colonial endeavours were pervasive and at the zenith of power. Within the purview of this paper, 19th century Indian Literature in English is limited to the works written in English by Indian authors (by birth or settlement) about the Indian experience. The prominent names include Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore, Henry Derozio, Michael Madhusudan Dutta, Toru Dutt and Krupabai Satthianadhan. Mrs. Frances Wright Collins, the author of *The Slayer Slain*, (henceforth TSS) was the wife of a missionary, Rev. Richard Collins who was the Principal of The College, Cotym (now CMS College Kottayam) from 1856- 1864. Due to ill health and untimely demise, she could not complete the slim novel, which seems be her sole literary output. Her husband completed and published it in *Vidya Sangraham*, the quarterly magazine of the college, in serialized form between 1864 and 1866. Although it lay in obscurity for over a century, the novel is now considered as a significant document for tracing the colonial modernity in Kerala, reflecting the social conditions then prevailing in Travancore. It contributes to the corpus of Victorian literature by giving a firsthand account of the life and practices of the small but powerful Syrian Christian community in Kerala, albeit through a missionary/ colonizer perspective. The notion of nation and revolt which was taking shape in north and central India hadn't quite taken hold of the Keralite's imagination. It is also interesting to note that the Syrian Christian tradition in Kerala pre-dates the Western Christian tradition by at least a few centuries<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, in order to appreciate the power dynamics during 19<sup>th</sup> century Kerala,

it is pertinent to note here that TSS can never be treated as just a piece of fiction as most of the events fictionalized in the story are based on actual events referred to in the missionary records like the Madras Church Missionary Register, The CMS Intelligencer and the Travencore Cochin Diocesan Record. They mention the burning down of slaves' churches and the conversion of a Brahmin in Mavelikkara under Rev. Joseph Peet. It has to be treated as a (fictionalized) documentary evidence of the socio-economic relations in the nineteenth century. Mrs. Collins is concerned with issues of caste as well as the superiority of Protestantism over Syrian Christianity. Menon observes the influence of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in the plot, where man's inhumanity to man is alluded to. In both novels, compassion, repentance and redemption form the focal themes. As missionaries considered caste to be a local variant of slavery, a connection is established between race/ slavery in the western society and caste/ subordination in India, pointing to an extraterritorial affinity (1674).

### **Forms of Power in *The Slayer Slain***

Next, the question of the kind of power wielded by the missionaries: Did they make inroads into the hearts and psyche of the natives? This paper argues that the missionary influence revealed in TSS is the perfect exemplar of Foucault's exercise of pastoral power through a good shepherd model of governance (124-129). Although the novel appears to manifest the humane and benign side of colonialism, a closer reading reveals darker layers of meaning and signification. The plotline follows the lives of Koshy Curien, an arrogant Syrian Christian landlord, and his family who are upper caste Syrian Christians; Poulosa, a lower caste untouchable slave; a local pastor and his family and an old Brahmin among others living in the picturesque background of Travancore and the Meenachil river. Koshy Curian is brought up in the Protestant faith, but reverts to a ritualistic, shallow and materialistic lifestyle. The novel deals with his change of heart of occasioned by the compassion and generosity of his untouchable *pulaya* slave. A parallel subplot traces the life of his exemplary daughter Mariam. She is educated at the mission school on liberal education and is heavily influenced by the Western Protestant school of thought. She is portrayed as an ideal Christian character in the western protestant worldview. *The conversion of an old Brahmin to Christianity* forms another important part of the novel's plot. Thus, it is seen that the three major characters in the novel represent three different types of turmoil in the turbulent times- Koshy Curien represents the upper caste anxieties over ruptures in the existing land and labour relations. In the person of Paulosa, we see the eagerness to question the existing relations of hierarchy and the embrace of a faith that promises equality in the eyes of God. Mariam, the 14-year-old daughter of Curien, is the voice of the mission school educated woman, questioning the existing gender role assigned to her as well as pondering on the essence of spirituality and goodness (Thomas 75).

The novel reveals three different forms of power coming into play. The first and the obvious one is the caste dynamics prevalent in 19<sup>th</sup> century Kerala. The upper caste Hindus and Syrian Christians equally ill-treated the lower castes as is seen in Koshy Curien's ill treatment of his slave. When the slave Poulosa requests for a break from work on Sabbath, he is beaten up and abused by Curien. "It is all your teaching and reaching, and you shall bear the suffering. Seize him! Seize him!... and his stick was raised again to add weight to the command..." (Collins 16). The caste subjugation in the slaves' minds was such that despite vastly outnumbering the master, they stood cowering, terrified and submissive in the face of violent abuse. Curien's blow meant for Poulosa accidentally kills his grandchild. This incident in the novel has strong historical roots. John Thomas affirms that in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, many of the untouchable slaves were converted to protestant Christianity, generating widespread fear and anxiety among the propertied Nair and Syrian Christian landlords over the possible breakdown of the existing socio-political economy and caste structure. This fear was often translated into "brutal and violent persecution of the slaves, especially those who were inclined towards Christian instruction and conversion" (69). Syrian Christians considered the missionaries responsible for instigating the slaves to flout existing rules. Thomas adds that the continuance of the caste structure in Travancore was partly due to the labour-intensive agrarian practices which required a steady stream of cheap labour for its sustenance. For this purpose, the lower castes- the *pulayas* and the *parayas*, were kept "in a perpetual state of landlessness, poverty and dependence by the upper castes, through denial of alternative forms of employment" (65). They were treated as commodities to be owned, bought and sold.

The second kind of power was that of the colonizer over the native. An example is the incident where the minions of Koshy Curien put Poulosa in chains and immerse him in muddy water with his head uncovered in the blazing sun. The native pastor, passing by, rescues Poulosa by threatening to report the minion's misconduct to the *sircar*. He intimidates the servants with the threat of bringing *sircar* peons to arrest and throw them in jail—"It will require but a few minutes to have a dozen Sircar peons on the spot, and when once within the walls of the Thanah you will find it no easy to get out again" (Collins 29). This shows that even an indirect subordinate of the missionaries of the colonizing *sircar* wields more power than the rich and powerful in a colony. It may be acceptable for the prevention of atrocities, but the larger question about the right of the colonizer to control native lives remains unanswered. The other examples are not so obvious. As part of their proselytization-based doctrine, the missionaries made inroads into the hitherto limited educational spaces of the state. The Western ideology was taught and disseminated through the educational spaces. Mission high schools and colleges sometimes became sites of struggle between competing sets of eastern and western values as in the case of Mariam. This encouraged her to denigrate and reject her traditional Syrian Christian practices in favour of Western Protestant ones. This implies a willing acceptance of the colonizer's religion and practices as opposed to her older and native traditions.

## Pastoral Power and the Good Shepherd Model of Governance

The third and the most pervasive power is seen in the form of what Foucault calls “pastoral power” (125-26). Pastoral power and how it plays out in the novel will be explored in the following paragraphs.

A perusal of the history of power reveals that we have come a long way from the “might makes right” credo. According to Freud, the simplest and immediate conception of power is that of “might makes right.” But in *The Genealogy of Morals*, Friedrich Nietzsche had preceded Freud in pointing out that in human society the weak, including women, will violate Darwin’s principle of survival of the fittest by conspiring to topple the strong by way of cunning and banding together (Freud, Nietzsche and Foucault qtd. in Rapaport 250-252). This being the case, the powerful realize that the overt display of power becomes intolerable and hence leads to unstable relationships. Foucault argues that the current social expressions of power, like, bureaucratic power – act as a response to and transformation of the ‘might makes right’ concept of power (Freud, Nietzsche and Foucault qtd. in Rapaport 250-252). This gives way to alternate forms of power like pastoral power. The paper argues that though the missionaries were not directly in charge of local governance, they exercised the invisible form of pastoral power or the good shepherd model of governance over the colonized natives.

Foucault argues that the pastorate in Christianity gives rise to a dense, complicated, and closely woven institutional network coextensive with the entire Church and the Christian community. He adds that in Christianity the pastorate practices an art of “conducting, directing, leading, guiding, taking in hand, manipulating men, of monitoring and urging them on step by step, thus taking charge of them collectively and individually throughout their life and at every moment of their existence”(164-65). In *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault discusses this good shepherd model of governance, which originated in the Near East and established a foothold in early Christian societies. Foucault summarizes the central attributes and features of this model as follows: Firstly, “the shepherd’s power is not exercised over a territory but, over a flock, even in its movement from one place to another. The shepherd’s power is essentially exercised over a multiplicity in movement” (129). So, whereas the Greek god is territorial, the Hebrew deity (the shepherd) wanders. In TSS, the missionaries form a parallel power structure either directly or through the local network of pastors, where they take up a beneficent role in educating the locals and being sympathetic towards them. They travel to the homes of the needy to render help and solace, as opposed to the needy going to the deity to pray for his needs. The whole of chapter 11 of the novel describes such benevolent deeds of the local pastor, who represents the local variant of the colonial missionary. He visits the dilapidated homes of the poor, cooks food for them and spreads the message of God. He also visits a Nair’s house where some men try to draw him into gossip. He chastises them for whiling away their time. Thus, the administration of kindness is over a whole flock, irrespective of religion and territory. And the

emissary of the deity in the form of the pastor visits and comforts the flock. In another instance, Mariam, a product of liberal missionary schooling, acts as a peace emissary and comforting angel to Poulosa by visiting his home- “Mariam took a Jack-leaf, and with ready fingers formed it into a kind of spoon, into which her grandmother dropped a piece of sugar and some powerful mixture, which Mariam with the help of the old woman placed in the mouth of the sufferer”(Collins 31). Thus, while the British governing officials became more isolated from Indians and resorted to scientific racism to justify their rule, the missionary educators directly or through a pastoral network became more engaged with Indians and grew increasingly sympathetic to Indian culture, and adamantly opposed scientific racism (Bellenoit 22-24). In essence the ‘good’, ‘ethical’ and ‘moral’ characters are all who follow the western Protestant practices.

Elaborating on the second feature of pastoral power, Foucault states, “pastoral power is fundamentally a beneficent power... its only *raison d'être* is doing good ...” (115). The essential aim of such power is “salvation of the flock” (115). This is an exercise of power akin to the violent conquest of enemies, the display of omnipotence through symbolism, and the prudent governance of a society, but its emphasis is decidedly spiritual. Moreover, such power is what Foucault calls the “power of care.” (127). The shepherd cares so zealously that he puts the well-being of the flock ahead of himself. Unlike the despot in Plato, the good shepherd provides for the flock; he does not make the flock tremble before his power, as that is detrimental to the flock’s well-being. The missionaries’ agenda seems to be almost entirely spiritual- they are interested in winning souls for the kingdom of God. For this, they preach the good news of the word of God with its central message of equality, protection, redemption and salvation. So, the persecuted slaves are drawn to the philosophy and are willing to convert to a religion which potentially offers them dignity and liberty. The missionaries’ endeavours do not seem to have any agenda or purpose apart from doing good. The exemplification of this power is again manifested in the local pastor who goes around doing good to all the needy, irrespective of caste or religion. He does not seem to seek any self-aggrandizement. Poulosa’s forgiveness towards Curien is also the result of manifestation of this beneficent power wherein he fully believes in the power of repentance and redemption. He does not feel the need for having a ‘reason’ in the worldly scheme of affairs to do good. He feels that praying for his enemy Koshy Curien will bring about his repentance and salvation.

At a socio-political level, Dilip Menon observes that “The colonial state, while it adopted the rhetoric of freedom and individual dignity, was reluctant to dismantle social structures like slavery that would involve both a loss of revenue as well as the allegiance of the landed groups who were their bulwark”(1667). He adds that “Missionaries rushed in where the colonial state feared to tread” (1677). In 1855, following the intervention of missionaries, a royal proclamation for the abolition of slavery was issued. Here, the missionaries come across as good shepherds who care for the flock without any benefit to themselves. They also

seem to attempt to establish equality before the law. But the document was vague enough to maintain existing labour relations without disrupting the existing social dynamics.

The third feature according to Foucault is that "pastoral power is an individualizing power"(169-70). The shepherd not only has to look after the flock as a whole, but each individual within the flock. He must correct the sheep that act in ways that are not for their own good, which the shepherd does by acting as the proper model of rectitude. The shepherd is powerful insofar as his example reveals itself to be salvific and therefore one that has to be followed by way of emulation. The assumption here is that whether master or slave, the attitudes of the natives is fallacious and needs to be corrected using the western Protestant faith. The novel persistently evokes the premise of the superiority of Protestantism over Syrian Christian faith.

Now, a note on the individualizing power at work in the novel : The earliest example is the reaction of Poulosa to the murder of his grandchild by Koshy Kurien. Poulosa is a Christian convert who is taught to practice the virtues of repentance and forgiveness. Filled with agony at the sight of his dead grandchild, he looks heavenward and gasps, "Saviour of mercy, Saviour of love, look down and pity us. Bless and forgive my cruel master. Lay not this sin to his charge, Amen, Amen"(Collins 18). Even under such harrowing circumstances, he is able to forgive and pray for his antagonist even if part of his behavior may be attributed to utter helplessness. Hence, instead of holding a grudge against his master, he returns good for evil. He saves the life of Mariam from drowning. When the boat carrying Mariam and her grandmother capsizes, Paulosa jumps into the raging river to save the life of the young girl. Later he throws a challenge to Koshy Curien saying "You killed my child, but I have saved yours. We are now equal" (Collins 38). Poulosa is claiming that they were equal in the spiritual realm. This 'insolence' shown by Poulosa in throwing a challenge to his master is also a reflection of pastoral power. He is taught about equality and brotherhood in Christ. This is what gives him the courage to speak thus.

The next example is the reaction of Koshy Kurien to Poulosa's challenge. Despite his haughty and violent behavior towards the slaves, Curien is eaten up by guilt about the death of the child but is too proud to admit it. This guilt and his inability to act upon it could be a reflection of his assertive Syrian Christian male identity constructed upon ideas of affluent lineage and feudal legacies which sets him above the slave whom he considers as nothing more than a commodity that he owned. But he is also a product of Western Protestant upbringing despite his Syrian Christian bloodline. Hence, he searches for Poulosa and on finding him, seeks Poulosa's forgiveness. Overcome with remorse, Koshy goes to the extent of accepting the *pulayan* as his teacher and equal, if not moral superior. "From now on, you are not my slave. I have known that you are more suited to be my master. I wish to learn from you" (Collins79). This echoes the missionary rhetoric of equality and brotherhood in Christ. It also echoes the influence of Foucault's pastoral power in the way the haughty Kurien humbles himself before a slave. It

is also interesting that despite the heavily patriarchal society of the time, he is consistently polite to his mother even when he doesn't agree with her actions, and is affectionate towards his beautiful wife. Further, he is absolutely besotted by his lovely 14 year old daughter Mariam, who is gentle, firm and bright.

As a new convert, Poulosa says that in his pre-Christian days, he used to steal and be dishonest, but after conversion, he became honest and straightforward. Koshy Curien's ritualistic, materialistic and cruel ways are attributed to his Syrian Christianity. When he decides to mend his ways through repentance, it is only under the guidance of the pastor, and hence construed as the corrective influence of western Protestantism and individualizing power. Next is the example of Mariam who is described as a model of piety and goodness. She tells her siblings stories from the Bible, and is actively responsible for the conversion of Poulosa into Christianity when she was but a child. When she goes to his home (an unusual act for a Syrian Christian woman to visit the house of a slave in those days), Poulosa recalls how she told him about the love of Jesus Christ and advised him against stealing mangoes. She argues with her father about his abusive attitude to slaves and his practice of meaningless religious rituals. When her father arranges a very advantageous marital alliance with Ummen Thoma's son for her, she actually persuades her father to back out of that socially advantageous marriage. She insists that the boy was uncouth and unread and that it was a spiritually incompatible match. Her attitude of placing compatibility and spirituality over material wealth and comforts is another reflection of her mission school education. She eventually marries a Protestant minister's assistant who is educated and decent, but not rich. Her worldview forms a direct reflection of the pastoral power embedded in her missionary school education.

The pastor's wife was initially an illiterate, irresponsible person and an avid gossip uninterested in pious activities. After her elder son's death she repents, mends her ways and turns to the Bible under the guidance of her husband. This is yet another example of individualizing pastoral power where the native is incapable of goodness without the guidance from the missionary network. And the old brahmin's ideology too is perceived as fallacious. His account of and his salvation is also through conversion into Christianity. He confesses that the Vedas had given him no solace even though he went to Kasi. His reading the book on atonement impressed him and facilitated his conversion to Christianity. This event can be called the crowning glory of the triumph of pastoral power as the upper caste Brahmin relinquishes his faith to embrace the faith of the colonizer. Thus, each individual's redemption is a result of conversion. And this power of accomplishing willing conversions from individuals is a manifestation of this individualizing power. And for each individual, the pastors follow up the case. And after conversion too, care is disseminated in many forms.

The texture and tone of the novel through the above examples seems to read like a sweet, feel-good text dealing with the higher, refined human emotions like repentance and forgiveness, and the triumph of the meek and humble over

the proud reverberating the biblical verses. But this paper argues that these instances actually reveal an art of the missionary network in conducting, directing, leading, guiding, taking in hand, manipulating men, of monitoring and urging them on step by step, thus taking charge of them collectively and individually throughout their life and at every moment of their existence. For the missionaries, the Syrian Christians represented the ‘prodigal son’, who had strayed away from the ‘true’ faith and become estranged, and therefore, in need of a conversion experience.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that while tracing the modus operandi of the missionaries in the colonial machinery, we can see a shift away from the “might makes right” impulse which is wrought through social repression and the formation of bad conscience. In the “Good shepherd model”, we see a reversal in practice whereby the despot who only cares about himself to the point that he does harm to the community, is replaced by the good shepherds who really care about the flock. But due to false consciousness and camera obscura, the colonizers perceive the actions, rituals and religion of the native as deficient and fallacious, conveniently ignoring the fact that as per evidence, Syrian Christianity in Kerala claims a history to be far older than their own European one. And in order to rectify the perceived fault lines, the colonizers in conjunction with the missionaries resorted to the “Pastoral power” politics instead of the overtly coercive “might is right” ideology. This means that instead of subjugating the natives through brute force, as done by the colonizing government, a parallel power structure is unleashed by the missionaries. This is more of an invisible power which rewrites the centuries old construct of the identity of the native individual in the social hierarchy. It is a form of power which threatens to destabilize and reconstitute the existing social dynamics. It shapes and trains the psyche of the individual into completely trusting and following a spiritual ideology very different from his own. In this expression of power, the individual within the flock is coaxed and guided with a proper model of rectitude and penitence to act in ways which are for “their own good”, a good which is decided by someone else though. The powerful and long-lasting psychological impact of this invisible power was to colonize the mind of the native, to devalue his own history and traditions, to make him internalize the faith of the colonizer and to completely modify his attitudes and behavior. This willing transformation and remodeling the ‘self’ into a western protestant model, points to the Pastoral Power dialectic proposed by Foucault- a power which ultimately results in the making of a fragmented, uneasy self, dependent upon the emancipatory potential of the colonizer’s religion to make sense of his life.

## Notes :

<sup>1</sup> In *A Survey of Kerala History*, Sreedhara Menon states that Christianity was introduced in Kerala in the first century A.D., which is three centuries before it

gained official recognition in Europe or became the established religion in Rome. Legend has it that Apostle St. Thomas landed at Maliankara, a place adjoining Muziris, in 52 A.D., converted several Brahmins and others and founded seven churches on the Malabar coast. Though some historians have questioned the historicity of this claim, Menon maintains that it is not an improbability considering the extensive trade relations prevalent between Kerala and the Mediterranean countries from the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC onwards. There are traditional accounts preserved by the Jews who came to Cranganore in 68 A.D. which contain a reference to the existence of a Christian community at the place. Further, the statement of Pantaenus, the head of the Alexandrian school who visited Kerala in the 2nd century A.D. that he found a flourishing Christian community here is also cited as evidence in favour of the Apostolic origin of the Kerala Church. Since the introduction of the Christian faith in Kerala, it has come to be accepted as an indigenous faith despite its foreign origin.

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## **FANDRY : A CINEMATIC JOURNEY FROM REJECTION TO RESISTANCE**

**Jaishree Kapur**

### **Abstract**

Within the realm of Bombay cinema or Bollywood—an industry (in) famous for providing an escape route from the social reality, there is a marked rejection of the voices from the margins owing to the commercial nature of the industry. Since cinema as a medium is hugely dependent on economic viability and collaborative ventures, Dalits who have been historically subjugated on social, economic, political, and cultural fronts have remained alienated from the film industry, barring a few exceptions. The films that dealt with the issue of caste have been mostly made with a sympathetic eye of the upper caste filmmakers who have projected the ‘others’ from a distanced position in order to bring to the surface, the social evils of the society. The recent developments in regional cinema have witnessed an emergence of filmmakers who do not condescend on telling tales on behalf of the marginalised and the oppressed but endeavour to represent in the visual realm, a world from within. This act of reclaiming one’s own agency by documenting a world full of dreams, desires, aspirations and the everyday lived reality of the excluded are moments that register sites of resistance. In this light, the present paper attempts to understand how Nagraj Popattrao Manjule in his first full length Marathi film, *Fandry* (2014) has represented the complex working mechanism of caste on screen by depicting the cinematic journey of an untouchable teenager boy who faces rejection on continual basis and becomes, “unseeable, unapproachable and un-hearable” (Kumar 1). The paper will further scrutinize how the filmmaker creates both moments of resistance that reject this reduction within the cinematic journey of his protagonist, and simultaneously recreates his own lived reality on screen which becomes an active act of resisting the hegemony of traditional *chaturvarna* caste hierarchies.

**Keywords :** Rejection, Marginal, Denial, Assertion, Location, Resistance

### **I**

*If I did not have a pen in my hand  
Then  
It would have been a chisel  
A sitar  
A flute*

*Or perhaps a canvas and brush*

\*

*I would have been digging*

*With whatever I had*

*This extravagant cacophony of mind*

—Nagraj Manjule<sup>i</sup>

Nagraj Popatrao Manjule belongs to the Vadar caste in Maharashtra who were traditionally relegated the work of cutting stones for their survival. Inspired by the teachings of Jyotiba Phule and Babasaheb Ambedkar, he became the first person to receive education in his family and completed his Masters in Marathi literature with the objective of becoming a professor in a university. The above quoted lines clearly throw light on how literary, physical, instrumental or artistic tools are simply different mediums to assert one's voice that has been rejected by the so-called canon; the medium for proliferating one's ideas might change yet the objective remains the same. *The urgency with which Manjule documents his voice in these lines also forms the guiding principle behind the cinematic medium chosen to depict his own life story on the celluloid. Interestingly, Fandry was released on the Valentine's day of 2014; a film about the innocent love of a teenage boy Jabya or Jabuwant Kachru Mane (played by Somnath Avghade), that reaches a realisation towards the end; realisation not in the traditional sense where the boy meets the girl leading to a fairy-tale ending that Bollywood has fed its audience since ages, but in sharp contrast, the journey of the protagonist makes him realise the impossibility of loving freely in a world bridled by the caste hierarchies, frustrating the expectations of the audience.*

Situated in the village of Akolnagar, near Ahmednagar, the child protagonist of Manjule's film, Jabya or Jabuwant Kachru Mane belongs to Kaikadi<sup>j</sup> community, a lower caste community that is presented as surviving on digging, construction work, and basket weaving in the film. Through the character of superstitious and eccentric Chankya (Nagraj Popatrao Manjule), the child has been convinced that only the ashes of a black bird can magically make the girl of his dreams—the upper caste, fair skinned Shalu or Shalini (Rajashree Kharat), fall in love with him. The film begins in a serene stretch of wood where the spectators are slowly led into the world of Jabya holding a slingshot with unblinking eyes transfixed onto the long tailed black sparrow. The tracking shots that bring us near Jabya are immediately succeeded by point of view shots, clearly establishing in the beginning of the film itself that the spectators shall see the world from the eyes of this teenager. The film clearly traces an insider's world created in order to familiarize the audience with the perspective of another insider i.e., the filmmaker. After Jabya's failed attempt to catch the elusive bird, there is a transition from this dreamlike landscape full of expectations and soft music on sarod to an arid, barren land where Jabya confronts the harsh realities of his life. While on the one hand, this fantasy like space is full of chirping birds, rustling leaves and stark bright light falling on the trees, the world where he

resides i.e., his hut is an unusually dark, dim lit space lacking electricity and something as essential as a gas stove. The walls of hut are covered by tin sheets and a family of seven manage with barely two cots. The makeshift hay covered roof too rests on the trunks of trees. It is a place rejected by the entire village—situated on the periphery of the village, it is akin to the peripheral existence of its inhabitants. This narrative technique of juxtaposing two contradictory worlds, one full of anticipations, dreams and desires that transcend one's caste position, and other where one is constantly reminded about the impossibility of achieving the former world becomes a predominant motif that runs throughout the film.

Animals and birds occupy a pivotal role in the cinematic narrative. In conjunction with Dalit folkloric allusions to birds and animals, the filmmaker unfolds the concept of purity/ pollution through intriguing symbolism. In an interview with Anupama Chopra, Manjule explains, "We impose caste system on animals; a crow is an untouchable but a sparrow is a brahman ..." <sup>3</sup> (Chopra) making apparent that it is not just the humans who remain burdened by caste oppression but animals too have been relegated different ranks by humans. In accordance with the superior caste position, the little black long tailed bird always holds an elevated status in the realm of the sky remaining beyond the reach of a simpleton like Jabya. The elusiveness of the bird is directly compared to the ambiguity with which Shalu is portrayed as she always remains distant to Jabya even when she is right in front of him. When an elderly woman scoffs him that the bird is a Brahmin, and she will be killed by her community members, if she is touched by him, there is a direct link established between the bird and Shalu. Contrary to the upper caste location of Shalu and the black bird, Jabya is likened to something as detestable and repulsive as a pig. In the essay, "Rejection of Rejection", Prof. Gopal Guru underlines, ". . . desire for recognition or elevation logically assumes corresponding reduction, rejection, cancellation, and annihilation of certain human beings" (Guru 210). The elevated status of one is necessarily hinged upon the reduced position of the other in the dialectics that govern caste politics. The word "fandry" which means pig in the local dialect of Kaikadi community becomes a symbol to unfold the mechanics of reduction as Jabya, and his entire family is reduced to the level of pigs, since their survival is contingent upon rearing, killing and eating the animal.

Aarti Wani in her essay, "Love in the time of Pigs" opines, "The pigs too are untouchable; girls scamper for a purifying bath if one touches them even accidentally" (Wani 73). Furthermore, both pigs and the only *Kaikadi* community in the village coexist on the waste-land where people go to relieve themselves. Since Jabya's traditional family occupation involves survival on pigs, his detestation of pigs (especially evident in his refusal to pick up a piglet from the sewage) concords with his detestation of his own untouchable caste. Pigs therefore, become synonymous to his loathsome caste position. They become a literal and metaphorical hindrance when he tries to directly approach Shalu. The film also throws light on hens and goats in several frames simply to lend an authentic rustic flavour to the narrative. It is this animal-bird symbolism that

enables the filmmaker to unfold the caste binaries on screen as the dreamlike landscape brimming with soft chirping sound of the birds is constantly juxtaposed with the sordid reality of a barren landscape where black, grunting, filth-smeared pigs reside.

One of the major ways to reinforce the caste binaries is through food and inter-dining rituals. Jabya's family is considered loathsome as they consume pigs who dwell in garbage and therefore, the family too is considered no less than filth by upper caste groups. The film concretizes the idea that people belonging to the same caste group share food with each other. Interestingly, when Jabya visits his friend Pirya (Suraj Pawar), he is immediately offered a cup of tea. However, the exchange between Jabya and his upper caste classmate is starkly different. Vedant has a cow in front of his house along with *tulsi* plant and picture frames of upper caste Hindu gods—all symbols for invoking purity and sacredness, amidst the danger of pollution. Instead of inviting Jabya for a glass of water in his house, Vedant tells him the syllabus that he missed on the previous day in school from the gate itself. In fact, a carefully constructed spatial boundary becomes acutely visible on screen as a man wearing *janeyu* (sacred thread) and *tilak* (vermillion mark) enters the house while Jabya stands outside the gate. Moreover, he is referred to as Kaikadi's son instead of his first name by Vedant's mother, clearly underlining how subtle caste markers employed by *savarna* groups allow them to draw caste boundaries and perpetuate hierarchies. Through these instances, Manjule clearly highlights an inherent sense of repulsion associated with a Dalit's body.

Jabya, Shalu, Pirya and Vedant all study in the same grade yet the starting line is different for each in accordance with their socio-economic conditions. Since, Manjule belongs to the first generation of people who received education in his family; he considers it as the only means which can bring a positive change within the Dalit community. This desire to bring the light of education amongst Dalits became an impetus for his first documentary film, *Pistulya*<sup>4</sup> (2009) which highlighted the struggle of a young boy to go to the school against all odds. *Fandry* seems to be a continuation of *Pistulya*, an attempt to answer what happens when a Dalit boy manages to reach school along with the other children of the village. Jabya who is enrolled in seventh grade, works as a labourer during the day at construction sites, occasionally sell baskets in the marketplace, and studies under the lamp all night without any external guidance. On the day when he gets a chance to go the school, he irons his shirt with hot coal chunks placed in a vessel, spends considerable amount of time combing his hair, and dabs his face with finely grinded particles of cement (perhaps picked up from the construction site he works at) to have a lighter skin tone. The classroom too is not a free space of learning where innocent children coexist in harmony but is steeped in deep biases. Jabya's only friend, Pirya is hit by his partner whenever their hands accidentally touch each other indicating the deep-seated notions of purity and pollution ingrained in the minds of not just the adults but at the nascent stage of childhood itself. Pirya's act of going back and sitting with Jabya is not an act of

finding refuge with his friend but an unsayable affinity with another untouchable—in this moment of affinity, they are not merely classmates but the two secluded isolated rejected untouchables, located, both literally and metaphorically on the periphery of the classroom.

Classroom is also a space where the verses by Chokhamela<sup>5</sup> are read aloud in order to instil the notion that rather than someone's caste, rank or status, one must look at the character of a person. Ironically, the upper caste students who are taught this poem practise exactly the opposite in their daily lives as Jabya is mocked by his classmates, precisely at the time when Chokhamela's verses are recited by the teacher. In the preceding sequence, an upper caste student takes out his mobile phone to openly challenge the authority of the teacher when he is scolded for not completing his homework. Such audaciousness too is a consequence of the power and the position of his father which has been passed on to him by the 'virtue' of being born in a certain *varna*. The location of his desk at the "centre" of the classroom allows him to act as a barrier<sup>6</sup> (both literally and symbolically), between the untouchable Jabya and the upper caste Shalu, and serves to underline the impossibility of the union between the two, undermining the idea of inter caste alliance as an effective measure to dispel the rigid caste boundaries and hierarchies. A clear disjunction between theory and praxis appears on the walls that surround the playground of the school as the graffiti images of Jyotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule, Babasaheb Ambedkar, Rajarshi Shahu, Sant Gadge Maharaj and Chatrapati Shivaji never enter into the psyche of students and these iconic images clearly fail to guide them towards an inclusive society. In an ironic undertone, Manjule highlights how the space that is supposed to engender knowledge hailing from the tradition of educationalists, social reformers and revolutionaries has now become an institution that breeds the caste hierarchies.

Within the narrative discourse of the film, Manjule brings to the surface the idea that rejection functions on the logic of denial and exclusion. The only Kaikaki community in the village has been traditionally denied education, as a consequence of which they have become subservient pawns in the hands of the upper caste village heads. Jabya's father called Kachru Nana (Kishor Kadam) almost forces his children to become passive receptors of caste oppression in the social fabric of the village. His entry into the film is marked by rebuking Jabya for leaving his construction work unfinished and for obsessing over his homework. It is a dysfunctional society where all the family members including Jabya's old grandfather and widowed sister who has a two-year-old son has accepted their reduced social and economic position merely in order to survive in the village. Indoctrinating a sense of worthless in the mind of Kachru by upper caste men and his mindless reiteration of the same when he is in the grip of alcohol; not granting him advance money in the wake of his daughters' marriage; constant use of slur words in order to humiliate him are in the words of Prof. Gopal Guru, "... coercive way(s) to reduce a person to servility" (Guru 216). He is excluded from the discussion during the gram panchayat meeting, from the so-called

politics of the village undertaken by *savarna* men but has been relegated the role of service and compliance in accordance with his caste position. When he finds out the love letter written by Jabya for Shalu, spectators expect him to thrash the child but on the contrary, he remains passive due to illiteracy. Lack of education has also created superstitious individuals like Chankya whose entry into the film is marked by mindlessly lighting incense sticks in front of gods and goddesses. He adorns his fingers with astrological gemstones, immerses himself half in mud, tells Jabya to kill the black bird and drowns himself in alcohol to escape his grim reality. While Jabya manages to enter the classroom premises, his sister, the fifteen-year-old Surekha has been denied education and is all set to be a bride against a dowry of twenty thousand rupees. Along with Surekha, her mother and sister contribute both in the public and private spheres yet they become prey to the verbal rebukes of upper-caste men due to their location at the intersection of caste, class and gender. In addition to the central plot, the film throws light on the lives of all these characters who are otherwise rejected by the dominant social groups in the village.

In one of the most iconic sequence of the film, the procession ritual of a local deity is traced where different people perform roles in accordance to their caste and class position. In order to gain recognition in the eyes of Shalu, Jabya insists on playing *halgi*; he wears a crisp new shirt, dances enthusiastically on rhythm of the music despite of being constantly brushed aside by upper caste men, and most visibly when he sits on the shoulders of Chankya. Immediately after a brief moment of ecstasy, he is made to come down both literally and metaphorically from the shoulders of Chakya to perform his role of holding the burden of his caste. It is not merely the lamp which burns over his head in this scene but the fire signifies the spirit of the child which burns as his desire for acceptance and recognition crumbles down right in front of the spectators. The scene is shot meticulously with a camera movement from overhead to low angle shot, capturing his face smeared with tears of rejection making it especially heart wrenching as it appears after the voiceover of his love letter. A suffocating ambience dispels on to the screen as the upper caste men vigorously dance right in front of his eyes as if to mock and ridicule his caste status. Manjule makes the audience loathe the very spirit of festivity itself that is hinged on the humiliation of a child's spirit.

## II

Rejection as a consequence of one's caste position gains a nuanced meaning within the cinematic narrative as it becomes visible in something as intangible as the desires of the two children who are located on the extreme end of the caste hierarchy. While Shalu enjoys wearing a pair of goggles, eating a candy, playing a game with her friends, trying out a pair of earrings in a fare and admiring hands designed with henna, Jabya desires something as essential as a notebook, a pair of trousers, and a moment where his eyes can meet with Shalu. The narrative depicts how she seamlessly fulfills her desires one after the other,

where as he perpetually lives in a state of denial. Clearly in this visceral world, desire too is contingent on one's caste, Manjule seems to underline. In tandem with one's desires, the first dream of Jabya highlights his inability to come out of the dark waters surrounded by the high walls of the well, symbolising his suffocation and impending drowning due to his caste position. In sharp contrast to this dream, there is another dream where he throws the ashes of the black sparrow on Shalu who holds his hand and rests her head on his chest to the shock and wonderment of the rest of the characters. Manjule, time and again creates a dream landscape from the perspective of a teenager boy but constantly shocks the audience by highlighting the unattainability of that dream. Since it is a world created from the lens of Jabya which in turn becomes the lens of audience, the denial to desire and dream freely brings the spectators into the realisation that Babasaheb Ambedkar's call of 'annihilation of caste'<sup>8</sup> remains a farfetched dream till date. Jabya's both literally and symbolically lights a lantern to read his missed lessons despite of his father's rebukes; his refusal to go with his family member sin order to purchase the much desired pants because of his upcoming exams; his counter denial to pick up a piglet from the sewage at the command of the upper caste couple; his ability to take charge of his own life for few brief moments by selling off ice lollies; his confidence that he can buy a pair of jeans with self-earned money by working hard and ultimately, his perpetual struggle to kill the brahmin bird in order to shatter the high walls of caste instead of merely accepting the impossibility of such an event are instances where Jabya registers moments of resistance within the narrative—resistance that is borne out of a belief that refuses to accept one's destiny as preordained. By charting these moments of resistance within the cinematic narrative, Manjule takes a departure from the popular discourse around Dalit narratives wherein the victim is usually dependent on the generosity of the pitiful, sympathetic, benevolent upper caste messiah for emancipation. However, instead of creating a utopia with erased caste boundaries, the filmmaker deliberately brings the audience back to the reality.

In the climax of the film, captured with meticulously employed VFX shots and a handheld camera, the entire family gets involved in hunting for the pigs on demand of the village heads. Jabya who should be inside his school at this time is denied that opportunity because of his family occupation<sup>9</sup>; he makes explicit remarks of his reluctance to be part of this hunting exercise because of the shame that it engenders but his requests fall on the deaf ears of his family members. His hiding behind the walls to see Shalu, now becomes an act of hiding from her. His occupation, lower caste status and familial affiliation i.e., the entire baggage that he had been hiding from his classmates from a long time is suddenly revealed which renders him absolutely vulnerable. Aarti Wani in her essay, "Love in the time of Pigs" explains the climax of the film in the following words :

In an extended sequence at the end of the film, Jabya stands exposed in front of the whole school. In a dilapidated place adjacent to the school is the pigs' roosting ground, and a reluctant, rebellious Jabya is forced and publicly

beaten by his father into helping him catch the pigs. The spectacle of Jabya's thrashing, followed by his ragged family's desperate scramble to catch the screeching, filthy pigs, attracts an audience; the upper caste thugs hoot and yell obscenities as they click and upload pictures of "Fandry match" via their mobile phones, even as Jabya's classmates, Shalu included, have ringside view of this "entertainment". Seething with humiliation and rage, Jabya finally realises that even as Shalu, casually sucking a candy, looks on, she can never "see" him, and no magic ash can dissolve the invisible walls that separate them." (Wani73)

In these moments of clear demarcation of caste and class boundaries, in the wake of continuously calling Jabya as '*fandry*', his classmates in alliance with the upper caste adults render him in the words of Prof. Raj Kumar as, "unseeable, unapproachable and un-hearable" (Kumar 1). Akin to the entire *savarna* group which enjoys the spectacle of a family divested of dignity and basic human need of self-worth, the spectators too stand condemned of merely watching the show without realising the need for an affirmative action. As Jabya carries the carcass of a pig in close proximity of the images of all the venerated stalwarts of Maharashtra, they appear one after the other as if lamenting this spectacle. However, Manjule obliterates the entire power dynamics as Jabya who has been the subject of rejection all through his life, gains complete realisation of his situation. The act of shedding away of his innocence and simultaneously regaining recognition is made visible as the perpetually hidden/hiding Jabya comes forward to hurl stones at the upper caste thugs, to in return reject the entire system which rejected him. In the last act of resistance, Nagraj Popatrao Manjule, the stone-breakers' son, makes this '*fandry*' throw stones at the ones who stand guilty of this visceral world, the real culprits who carry the filth underneath their skins, the spectators.

### III

It becomes imperative to remember that that the story, screenplay, dialogues and direction of the film has been done by Nagraj Popatrao Manjule himself for which he has been conferred with the Indira Gandhi Award for Best Debut Film of a Director at the 61<sup>st</sup> National Film Awards and the grand Jury Prize at the Mumbai International Festival besides several other national and international accolades. Over the past few years, filmmakers who belong to Dalit community such as Neeraj Ghaiwan, Mari Selvaraj, Pa. Ranjith, Chaitanya Tamhane have successfully tried to create films that are strongly rooted in caste-based narratives<sup>10</sup> in their own unique manner. Behind the critical acclaim of Manjule's low budget film<sup>11</sup>, there lies more than a single, unidimensional formulaic notion. His choice of non-actors as characters, shooting within a village situated in remote corners of Maharashtra, the raw realism with which he presents the daily lived experiences of his characters, his poetic language that transmutes the social fabric of society on screen through the visuals, the rustic flavour visible in the spoken dialect of Kaikadi community, and most crucially,

the employment of point of view shots to assert his agency of ‘showing’, rather than being shown are ways in which he deliberately takes a departure from the so-called mainstream cinema.

Moreover, his own characterisation as Jabya’s confidante in the film in the role of Chankya paves a way for him to overtly mark his presence on the screen. The entire back story of Chankya is traced in a conversation between Jabya and Pirya as they reveal that he married an upper caste-class woman but her brothers thrashed him and took her back, leaving him completely dejected. It is noteworthy that Chankya is aware that neither the queen of his dreams nor the queen of carom shall be in store for him. He encourages Jabya to not only pursue the girl he desires but also encourages him to reject his traditional family occupation, even when the latter has been unsuccessful in starting a new business. He not only physically places Jabya on his shoulders during the procession of the local deity but finds a deep affinity with him. In an interview with Irfan titled, “Guftagoo with Nagraj Majule”, the filmmaker explicitly lays bare his fascination yet disappointment with Bollywood films that terribly fell short to reveal the harsh realities of his own life which became an impetus for him to create such a film. He mentions how Kaikadi community that he depicts on screen, kills, consumes, and survives on pigs akin to his own Vadar community—locating points of convergence between his marginal self and its recreation on screen. He further adds in the interview that he never faced any difficulty in casting a non-actor as the protagonist since these actors live such characters on an everyday basis, further underlining points of congruence between Jabya and himself. At a public forum in Auranga bad<sup>12</sup>, Nagraj confessed that the fascination by the western jeans and t-shirt outfit, ironing clothes to earn daily wages, playing halgi in a procession, working on a construction site are incidents borrowed directly from his own life. In an interview to Alaka Sahani, Manjule mentions how the film has been a “cathartic” (Sahani) process that led him to relive the experience of humiliation as well as realise individual agony which resulted from the desire to love, irrespective of caste boundaries. To concretise it further, one can note how the unusual physiognomy of the child protagonist as a dark, shy and hesitant boy who is not only from the lower caste, but also far from the conventionally prescribed notions of a ‘good looking’ actor, allows Manjule (both as Chankya and as the director) in a literal and metaphorical manner to re(en)vision his own lived reality on screen.

In the introduction of his book, *Dalit Personal Narratives: Reading Caste, Nation and Identity*(2011) Prof. Raj Kumar explains how assertion of the marginal self is an act of challenging the status quo in the following words:

Dalits, who have been raising their voice for quite some time, through their respective personal narratives were rarely heard of and thus systematically neglected in the academic circle. One possible reason for this neglect could be the fact that these voices challenge the hegemony of the upper caste and make way for assertion of the marginal self. (Kumar 1)

This systematic neglecting of Dalit personal narratives has become sharper and more acute within the visual space<sup>13</sup>recently; but through this film, Nagraj Popatrao Manjule has been successfully able to question the so-called canon while asserting his identity as a Dalit filmmaker within neo-liberal multiplex culture. On the surface, the film belongs to a specific medium yet, Manjule depicts the entire tradition of activists and philosophers from Maharashtra through graffiti images, presents a rare site where spectators hear the verses of Chokha mela in a modern-day school and suffuses his cinematic text with calendars, posters, photo frames, placards to communicate visual cues to the spectators. This amalgamation of multiple art forms to assert one's life story concords with his words in the beginning of this paper i.e., all the forms available in the hands of the artist are mere tools to communicate the views to the audience. If analysed carefully, this act establishes yet another form of resistance—resistance to adhere to any single specific formulaic notion of medium specificity. The film traces the transformative internal journey of Jambuwant Kachru Mane from rejection to resistance and in doing so, it pricks the conscience of the spectators till they are laden with transformative potential to traverse another journey towards an inclusive society.

### **Notes :**

- <sup>1</sup> Nagraj Manjule's first poetry collection in Marathi, *Unhachya Kataviruddh was conferred with* the Bhairuratan Damani Sahitya Puraskar, besides several other accolades. The above-mentioned lines are translated by Yogesh Maitreya which appeared in an article titled, "Why Sairat filmmaker Nagraj Manjule's poetry may prove to be his more powerful Legacy" published in Gateway Litfest on December 12, 2017.
- <sup>2</sup> Kaikadi community has been considered one of the criminal tribes during Indian colonial period and continues to have a problematic existence in several parts of rural Maharashtra even today. For a detailed examination of Kaikadi as de-notified tribe, see "De-Notified and Nomadic Tribes: A Perspective" by Milind Bokil published in Economic and Political Weekly.
- <sup>3</sup> The quote has been borrowed from the subtitles provided in Manjule's interview with Anupama Chopra which otherwise took place in Hindi language.
- <sup>4</sup> The fifteen minutes long film has been conferred with more than twenty awards including the National Film Award for Best First Non-Feature Film of a Director by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, India to Nagraj Manjule in 2011 and National Film Award – Special Jury Award to the child actor Suraj Pawar by the Directorate of Film Festivals by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, India in 2011.
- <sup>5</sup> A 14<sup>th</sup> century untouchable poet from Mahar caste in Maharashtra, Saint Chokhamela became widely popular for his songs and verses.
- <sup>6</sup> Nagraj Manjule's film *Sairat* (2016) which became the highest grossing Marathi film of all times obliterated the gender dynamics within the film especially through the scene where the upper caste female protagonist unabashedly stares at her lover within the classroom space making him uncomfortable. The depiction of

impossibility of loving freely gained another dimension in the film as the actors move from rural to urban space and lead a marital life but the love, hopes, and aspirations culminate in honour killing.

- <sup>7</sup> During the post-harvest season in the villages of Maharashtra, auspicious dates are announced and the local deity is decorated in the palanquin as shown in the film. These festivities are directly linked to ancestral traditions and the roles regarding holding the palanquin, deity, flags etc. are well defined as per the caste status of an individual. Jabya yearns to play the traditional instrument halgi during this procession but he has been assigned the role of bearing the heavy weight lamps on his head.
- <sup>8</sup> *The Annihilation of Caste* (1936) is a book authored by Babasaheb Ambedkar. Initially, it was prepared as a speech to be delivered in Lahore. The phrase has been incorporated in the above paper to substantiate the argument.
- <sup>9</sup> For a detailed study of occupational discrimination as part of social exclusion, see “Caste and Economic Discrimination” by Sukhdeo Thorat and Katherine S. Newman published in *The Problem of Caste: Essays from Economic and Political Weekly* edited by Satish Deshpande.
- <sup>10</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the cinematic aesthetics that guide each of these film makers.
- <sup>11</sup> The film has been made within the budget of one crore seventy-five lakh rupees and received a return of seven crores. For understanding the film within the larger economic perspective of Marathi cinema, see “Fandry and Sairat: Regional Cinema and Marginality” by Hrishikesh Ingle published in *Economic and Political Weekly*. (Special Articles)
- <sup>12</sup> The information has been provided to the author by Mr. Gopal Shrinath Tiwari, the dialogue writer of the Marathi film, Poet in Two Worlds (2020) who had a personal interaction with the filmmaker in Aurangabad.
- <sup>13</sup> The active media trail on the issue of nepotism has been largely restricted to class structures within cinema instead of shedding due light on the caste biases within the cultural matrix of the film industry.

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# **LOCATING HOTEL AS A POSTMODERN TROPE OF HOMELESSNESS AND A MICROCOSSM OF SEGREGATIONIST SOCIETY OF LONDON IN MONICA ALI'S *IN THE KITCHEN***

**Shafayat Hussain Bhat and Amandeep Singh**

## **Abstract**

Hotel as a space of temporary stay represents the site of displacement, fluidity and homelessness, characteristics which are at the centre of debates in postmodern geography. Monica Ali's *In the Kitchen* (2009) is a postmodern spatial investigation of a metropolitan city like London which is metonymically represented in the microcosm of the Imperial hotel in the novel. This article attempts to locate the hotel as a spatial metaphor fitting into the postmodern assertions of multiplicity, fluidity and a mobile space. *In the Kitchen* maps the segregationist spatiality of Britain and an unequal and disempowering spatial pattern which is evidently manifest in the spatiality of the hotel. The basement of the hotel, where immigrant workers of the hotel reside presents a dreary picture of oppression and exploitation. While the hotel stands for a postmodern notion of a home, the void created by the absence of a conventional home is filled by spaces of exploitation and marginalization. Those who have landed at the shores of Britain in the hope of a new home have been confined to the underbelly of seemingly cosmopolitan centre of London, rendering them both homeless as well as invisible to the outer world.

**Keywords :** Diaspora, Home, Hotel, Space, Spatiality, Postmodern Geography.

The idea of a hotel, though hundreds of years old, fits perfectly into the postmodern assertions of fluidity, arbitrariness, and an antithesis to the modernist notions of fixity and rootedness. It is a space that reflects the tensions between the idea of a conventional home and globalised world of travel and flux. It is a contested space that refuses to be categorised as a public or private space. This study is prompted by the need to explore the conditions of the marginalized class of immigrants who, because of homelessness are caught in the vicious cycle of exploitation.

Monica Ali's *In the Kitchen* (2009) provides an opportunity to explore the underworld of misery and exploitation as it is set mostly in and around the Imperial hotel in the novel. Since this study keeps its focus on the spatial

dynamics of the immigrant experience, insights from thinkers on human geography will be used to better understand the issues. Analysing immigrant experience from a spatial perspective sheds light on the hitherto underexplored prevalent spatial structure of a cosmopolitan space like London, which is home to people of diverse backgrounds. The seemingly innocent spatiality lends cover to an embedded power structure and vicious segregation on which the capitalist model of economy thrives.

*In the Kitchen* (2009) takes up the issues faced by migrants from different parts of the world and the hostile treatment meted out to them by the host country Britain. Monica Ali has used the microcosm of a kitchen and the basement of a hotel as a spatial metaphor to foreground the condition of invisible and alien immigrants. Though there are numerous immigrant characters from various backgrounds, the novel primarily revolves around the character of Gabriel Lightfoot, who is chef of the hotel named Imperial Hotel and has a dream of his own hotel. A death in the basement of the hotel exposes the dangerous conditions in which immigrants live. Ali has chosen basement of the kitchen as setting of the novel to show how these immigrant workers who speak different languages are underpaid and are involved in daily deadly fights. Hotel as a trope is a space where multiple transnational languages, cultures and identities interact and converge with each other. Ali analyses London as a cosmopolitan, postcolonial city to expose the spatial hegemony and segregation prevalent there.

In his influential book *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*, Edward Soja remarks that, "Space in itself may be primordially given [...] the organisation and meaning of space is a product of social translations, transformations and experiences" (80). Cities and towns or for that matter any residential areas do not evolve naturally into their present form, but they are deliberately designed in a way to create and sustain a model of space which is responsible for producing an unequal society. Such a spatial structure creates a division of centre and margins and those who are constructed as inferior on the basis of race, class, gender or any other disempowering category are pushed to the margins. Edward Soja in his book *Postmodern Geographies* disapproves the myth of linear narratives which emphasise the historical and progressive notions favouring time and giving space little significance (2). Soja acknowledges the contribution of Henry Lefebvre who revolutionised the category of space as a form of analysis to challenge the historical imagination which had discouraged any critical insight towards spatiality of life. For example, Lefebvre in his book *The Production of space* (31) refused to analyse or see city as a progress from industrial to post-industrial state as a historical fact. Rather he believed that the city was a web of complex spatial relations whose fragmented composition can only be understood by analysing its spatiality or spatial relations.

Monica Ali's *In the Kitchen* (2009) is a case study for unravelling a constructed space and a spatial structure, where some live at the centre and many are pushed to the margins as disempowered lot. *In the Kitchen* is set in London

and its action mostly unfolds in the kitchen of The Imperial hotel. She has chosen the kitchen of a hotel as the setting of her novel with a purpose to delve deep into a crisis that affects the lives of immigrants both legal and illegal. At the heart of this crisis is the lack of a home for people who have arrived in London from different places of the world. Kitchen as a spatial metaphor helps us capture the real essence of immigrant experiences. "In the novel, the hotel is a place of poignant antithesis where global, mobile, and affluent elites and the global, mobile and impoverished 'invisibles' intersect. At the same time, the hotel functions as the most obvious emblem of the nation" (Theodotou 13).

Hotel is a place that signifies homelessness and also a place where many homeless immigrants in the form of cooks and chefs find a temporary home. Ali's focus on the immigrants who work in the kitchen of the hotel helps us understand the acute sufferings of the immigrants who are relegated to marginal spaces and rendered invisible. Hotel acts as a temporary shelter for people and it cannot be called a home in the real sense of the word. "For Postmodernists the collective identity of homeland and nation is a vibrant and constantly changing set of cultural interactions that fundamentally question the very idea of home and host" (Cohen 127). The number of immigrants who have come to England and continue to come in have challenged the inward looking and exclusive notions of home and identity. *In the Kitchen* is a postmodern critique of the autochthonic narratives of home and space: narratives that project home as an originary and primordial entity of a native community. The Imperial hotel is an intersection where those who have been dispersed and those with "indigenous" claims meet and disrupt each other's identity notions.

Looking at the kitchen of his hotel, Gabriel, an English Chef can see a cosmopolitan environment thriving there but at the same time he cannot overlook the living and working conditions of these people working in his hotel. "What a place, thought Gabe, looking away at the grilled and bolted backdoor and the barred and lightless window. What a place: part prison, part lunatic asylum, part community hall" (14). The kitchen provides space to all the immigrants to preserve and practise their respective identities, without lending space to any particular identity to establish any kind of primacy over other identities. The space of the kitchen does not project any particular identity on the basis of class, race or any other category but promotes a cosmopolitan culture where each individual respects every other individual's language and culture. What keeps them together is a shared responsibility to their work and not any national identity. But Gabriel's description of the place as prison depicts the larger picture of beleaguered immigrant lives. These workers, who come from different countries of the world, even do not know each other very well. They are involved in quarrels, deadly fights but their world remains unknown to the outside world. It is a kind of underworld that Monica Ali has chosen to write about to explore its dynamics. "The colonial, postcolonial and neo-colonial cartography of the city of London is metonymically contained in the space of the hotel's kitchen, where a

number of workers of very different nationalities – from porters to cooks, from the commis to chefs – meet” (Pereira 1).

The issue at the heart of the novel is “about a nation which needs to rework its model of space” (Jain 12) to include those who are racially marginalized. Jasbir Jain’s observation on the need to rework the model of space captures the central message of Ali’s *In the Kitchen*. The need to ‘rework the model of space’ stems from the need to include ‘others’ in the spatial fabric of the nation which is home to both natives as well as those who have arrived or have been brought to England due to various reasons and compulsions. Monica Ali employs the hotel as a “symbol of the transient condition of contemporary nomad and migrant selves and of advanced capitalism and its forms of exploitation” (Paganoni 207). Kitchen of the hotel bears testimony to the exploitation of the disenfranchised class of the millennium. That the hotel is involved in two illegal scandals of prostitution and human trafficking comes as a shock to Gabriel. Gabriel’s search leads him to the unknown and invisible ugly side of Britain through the microcosm of the Imperial hotel. A number of immigrants working in the hotel are held hostage and in bonded labour by snatching away their documents and are forced to work on low wages. Lena, who Gabriel meets after Yuri’s death is an escapee from the prostitution mafia run by people associated with the hotel where Gabriel works. Through her Gabriel comes to know about a larger network of human trafficking and prostitution in which poor immigrants are pushed forcibly. What comes as a shock to Gabriel is that many people he knows and work in the hotel are involved in such scandals and that politicians like Fair weather express helplessness about such things points to political acquiescence in such matters.

Hotel as a spatial metaphor is quite relevant to the depiction of immigrant experience of those who suffer from homelessness. While those who work in the hotel, find a temporary home, yet this space is riven with death and gloom. The issue of home in the novel can be analysed from three angles. The first is homelessness of the immigrant workers and their exploitation at the hands of influential people. Second, Gabriel who is a native Englishman also suffers from a similar crisis of home and identity much like his multicultural staff of hotel kitchen. Having lived in many places and experienced different cultures, he also identifies himself with the condition of his workers. Third, home can be analysed at the level of the nation which is England. All these three angles can be understood by locating hotel as a spatial metaphor of postmodern geography.

Hotel acts as a microcosm of the larger society of London which is the global centre of migration and capital. Hotel is a place that signifies homelessness and temporariness. “Ali’s novel exploits the liminal and fluid setting of the hotel, a mutable and culturally constructed mixture of representation and physical form” (Paganoni 206). By choosing a native as principal character to depict the conditions of immigrants and changing spatial scenarios throughout the world and particularly in Britain, Monica Ali lends more credibility to her narrative. Through Gabriel’s eyes we witness the change that has taken place in the spatial

composition of London. The novel shows the constant challenge to the exclusive notions of Britishness and how Britain is a home to not only white British people, but people of multiple ethnicities and races and immigrant communities. Gabriel's kitchen is full of people who have left their home and homelands behind for a new home in the UK, but they have been contained in spaces that block their attempts at becoming part of the host country. These workers like Nikolai (Russian), Lena (Belarusian), Oona (Caribbean), Olek (Ukrainian), Benny (Liberian), Victor (Moldovan), Suleiman (Indian) are all without a home. He often talks to them about their countries and their homes and such talks make him aware about his own home and identity. When he asks Benny whether he had someone waiting for him at home, he says that it depended on what he meant by home. So he in a way frees the concept of home from its territoriality, laying it open to multiple meanings. Everyday practices of making home in Britain also reflect access to resources and documentation. Those who are asylum seekers or undocumented migrants have limited access to homemaking practices (Binaisa 52). So, for someone like Benny, home is neither in Liberia, where he comes from and nor in London, where he is staying.

Death of Yuri in the basement of the hotel, a space which is referred to as catacombs, a spatial symbol for the dead, points towards the larger living conditions of immigrants in the British society and how they are viewed. The 'catacombs' which is a resting place for the likes of Yuri is a kind of subterranean space where they must retire after their work to remain invisible to the outside world. The economy of Britain is dependent on the likes of Yuri, who burn their blood to keep the engine of economy going, yet they cannot be accepted outside in the spatial mainstream and must remain hidden in the underground. These illegal immigrants who remain hidden due to police actions get trapped in the networks of bonded labour and human trafficking. The question that arises is; what makes this class of immigrants undesirable to belong to the spatial mainstream? What is it that debars them imagining their host country as their home? The answer lies in unravelling the definition of home and the narrative that shapes the notion of home in a larger context. Rosemary George states that, "national subjects/citizens who are in the process of formulating or reformulating a new national identity for themselves and for fellow citizens culturally create and recreate home as vigorously as do diasporic peoples" (561). Rosemary's remark brings attention to the politics of creating a home whether in settler countries or in diasporic context. In both the contexts, the process involves a complex set of negotiations that paves the way for formulation of a home that may be found on the premises of inclusion and exclusion. *In the Kitchen* basically revolves around this provision of home as a space of inclusion and exclusion. It analyses home in the larger context of the nation, which is bound to leave some people on the outside.

Susheila Nasta in her book *Home Truths: Fictions of South Asian Diaspora in Britain* quotes Caryl Phillips to throw light on the notion of home in British context. She quotes Caryl Phillips as,

The once great colonial power that is Britain has always sought to define her people, and by extension the nation itself, by identifying those who don't belong. Thus, many black or Asian immigrants and their descendants in the post-war period who did not conform to the predominant image of white cultural acceptability felt that they had no place or space to express their relationship to the dominant narratives of British life. (3)

Monica Ali addresses the issue of home in the larger context of the nation which in this case is England. There is a fear and anxiety that the outsiders are outgrowing in numbers and changing the very fabric of their country and culture. The immigrants are not only affecting a physical change in the surroundings but are also making an influence on the local culture as well. The local populace wants to maintain a kind of distance from the outsiders. They believe that too many immigrants have polluted their way of life. "The Howarths moved into number 17. You can breathe a bit up here said Howarth. I have got now against 'em but who wants to smell curry seven o'clock in the morning to eleven o'clock in the night [...] breed like rabbits n all" (69). It is this other perspective that mostly lacks in other diasporic narratives. Monica Ali gives us a thorough insight into the home of an English family as well. Their concerns and apprehensions regarding the changing demography are vividly described. At the centre of this narrative lies a fear of the 'other'. Jopi Nyman sees Ali's novel as an attempt "for the need to replace nationalisms with cooperation and mutual acceptance" (Nyman 101). But as Caryl Phillips remarks above, Britain as a nation defines itself by excluding those who do not fall within the premise of 'white culture'.

Nana's concern about Asians especially Muslims taking over the place shows that she feels her home and homeland are under threat from outsiders. She believes in a home that is fixed and unchangeable, not recognising the change that is inevitable. "These whatsits, Muslims, there's no understanding them, is there? I mean, we've took them in. we've them a home [...] Mug shots, terror plots, training camps, grainy videos...what've we done to them? And we have to check under our beds every night. Not safe, none of us. Are we? Not safe in our own beds" (390). Gabriel's grandmother Nana is one such character in the novel who always feels that their homeland and country are being taken over by immigrants. She refers to incidents that have actually not happened in reality. She suffers from memory loss in her old age and imagines things that have not actually happened. For example she believes that someone's house was overtaken by immigrants from Pakistan. "The whole attic said Nana in an ecstasy of indignation, was full of Pakistanis". Nana imagines things that don't happen in reality. It is her mental illness that makes her concoct imaginary happenings. Ali seems to have on purpose such concerns expressed by a character who suffers from dementia, to render them unfounded and merely speculative.

As Avtar Brah remarks that in diaspora space, both immigrants as well as those who claim to be natives are on the same plane and are no different from each other and this holds true in case of Gabriel. Gabriel's experience and his later crisis also stems from the fact that he has lived in many places across the

world and this transnational experience has impacted him accordingly. "Gabe had worked in places where porters came as a job lot, the first getting along a cousin who recommended a brother-in-law who also brought his friend. Before you knew it, there was gang of them, and that only spelled trouble ahead" (99). Gabriel is production of the transnational experience, a globalised world where everything from capital, labour, technology, culture, crime etc. travel from one part to the other part of the world. Gabe at times feels like the people who are working in his kitchen. He too feels without a home and suffers from an identity crisis. For instance, when he once observes his flat where he lives, he feels a strong sense of homelessness.

Back in the sitting room he paced steadily. The more he looked at the furniture, the less familiar it felt. The hard green sofa belonged in a waiting room, the black chaise was hideous, the lacquered shelves were empty and the white-cube coffee table was pretentious beyond belief. Who would want to live here? Who could call this place a home? (433).

Having lived away from Britain for so many years, Gabriel faces a crisis in imagining Britain as his only home. Any individual such as Gabriel whose ideas and identity have been shaped by a transnational experience would exhibit similar tendencies of identity crisis and homelessness. As Avtar Brah says, "home is where you are from, but it is also what you move towards socially, politically and psychically. It is not a fixed node, but a moving signifier constructed and transformed in and through social practices, cultural imaginaries, historical memories and our deepest intimacies" ("Some Fragments" 173). This gives home a subjective twist which has psychic and social composition. Gabriel is a modern mobile individual who is uprooted despite living in his homeland, completely disoriented and struggling to make sense of home. He empathises with his workers who are homeless and feels one like them. "Transnational practices are often conceptualized as being carried out across spaces, excluding the possibility of attachments to specific places" (Sheringham 61). So, it is quite natural for Gabriel to not to feel at home in Britain only as his transnational experience also cuts across spatial boundaries of home.

The new world that Gabriel Lightfoot enters is one of unhomeliness: traditions no longer secure a sense of identity for its inhabitants [...] *In The Kitchen* shows that contemporary globalization and its effects demand a reassessment of Britishness [...] the novels vision of Britishness forces us to think the role of nation as a source of identification (Nyman 213).

Gabriel like his multicultural staff in his kitchen also faces the dilemma of identity and belonging. Unlike his white chauvinist father, he never identified himself with the milling town of Blantwistle, the place of his birth and an epitome of an England that promotes whiteness as the essence of British identity that is struggling to keep the narrative intact. Gabriel's father Ted mourns the fact that the homogeneous British identity has been displaced by a more inclusive and heterogeneous identity formation. Gabriel responds by inviting Ted's attention to the kitchen of his hotel which is plural and cosmopolitan and represents every

part of the earth. "You should see my kitchen, Dad. I've got every nationality in there and everyone gets along" (242). Gabriel is a product of the contemporary London, which is a centre of global flows in the form of people and capital. As Doreen Massey in her article 'Geographies of Responsibility' asserts that, "it might be argued that London/Londoners have begun to assume an identity, discursively, within self the self-conception of the city, which is precisely around mixity rather than a coherence derived from common roots" (3-4). In his interactions with his father, he points towards the kitchen of his hotel as an example of multiculturalism and coexistence, even though there are serious limitations to what he refers to as a space of mutual living. The notion of home is still tied to a nativist discourse which renders so many people homeless despite living in a place for centuries.

## Conclusion

By choosing to keep hotel at the centre of her narrative, Monica Ali has attempted to depict the disruptive postmodern spatiality which is characterised by flux and mobility. The focus of the novel remains on the space and place, the politics and the power relations that are embedded in the spatial structure of a society. Issues depicted in the text are visualised through concrete geography that is shaped by the narratives of race and is also confronted by the new realities of globalisation and immigrant arrivals. The hotel reflects the tension between the conventional home and forces of globalisation. The town of Blantswistle and the kitchen of the Imperial hotel are two cartographic representations of the segregationist as well as the changing spatial dynamics of England. The Imperial hotel serves as a kind of mirror of Britain as a nation, where two worlds exist side by side but spatially segregated from each other. Ali's novel espouses the cause of heterogeneous communities and the space of kitchen is a rebuttal to the homogenous majoritarianism. The multicultural space of the kitchen of the hotel stands for the changing spatial dynamics of Britain. It is now a home to not just the white British but to those as well who have landed at its shores as immigrants in search of a new life. Ali's novel is a compelling narrative for the need to recognise the 'other' as an indispensable part and to recognise their rights to call Britain as home. It challenges the autochthonic claims of home or narratives of identity based on tribal notions and exclusive premises of whiteness in the contemporary transcultural and transnational world. She does this by placing these discourses within the spatial rhetoric of transcultural and diaspora space. She situates her novel in the space of the hotel, especially in its kitchen, to portray the diverse life and people of multiple nationalities struggling to make their way into the fabric of British society. These unacknowledged and unwanted immigrants are spatially confined to the subterranean world and Ali tries to give voice to them. The Imperial hotel stands as a symbol for Britain which has lost its past glory even though it still exists to exercise control over its multicultural staff that Gabe calls "United Nations task force".

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## THE FLORA AND FAUNA IN KARNAD : A STUDY OF NĀGA-MANDALA AND THE FIRE AND THE RAIN

**Devamitra Chakraborty**

### Abstract

Downing Cless argues that “natural environments become dramatic forces, taking action with agency or reacting as enforced victims, not unlike characters” in plays which can “powerfully bring on stage the other-than-human world and its endangerment”(1). Moreover, Critics like Christine Gerhardt and Christa Grewe-Volpp speak about the possibility of intersection of ecocriticism and ecofeminism and create new avenues for reading texts to understand the symbiotic relationship between human and the nonhuman spheres. This paper tries to analyse the representation of the nonhuman world in Karnad’s two plays— *Nāga-Mandala* (1988) and *The Fire and the Rain*(1994)— to understand the ecological ideas and vision of the playwright from an eclectic perspective. The two plays together bring on the stage the biotic sphere of the natural environment, the fauna and the flora. Besides presenting a gallery of animals that comprise both the physical world and the psychological world of its heroine, *Nāga-Mandala* has, a nonhuman animal, as a major character who morphs into human shape to become a protagonist. *The Fire and The Rain*, has the abiotic elements in the very title of the play. The play is set on a barren land which is parching in famine and the people are desperate to get rains. But as a contrast to this wasteland there is a reference to a forest which becomes an off stage character in the play. The texts read together give us the playwright’s vision of the relationship between the human world and the non-human world which is shaped by Indian cultural and philosophical traditions. But the plays are also interrogative in nature which interrogates the discourse of development propagated by capitalist discourse that has victimized both the fauna and flora. The texts give us the picture of rural India which lives in close proximity to nature and they share a symbiotic relationship with it. The plays also highlight that in the human world it is the woman who shares greater proximity to nature in comparison to man.

**Keywords :** Ecocriticism, ecofeminism, development, environment, dominant discourses, Other, woman

Downing Cless in his introduction to his book *Ecology and Environment in European Drama* argues that “natural environments become dramatic forces, taking action with agency or reacting as enforced victims, not unlike

characters"(1). He again argues that "Although theatre is largely human-centered" the drama can "powerfully bring on stage the other-than-human world and its endangerment"(1). Karnad's *Nāga-Mandala* (1988) and *The Fire and the Rain* (1994) together bring on the stage the biotic sphere of the natural environment, the fauna and the flora respectively. Besides presenting a gallery of animals that comprise both the physical world and the psychological world of its heroine, *Nāga-Mandala* has a nonhuman animal, as a major character who morphs into human shape to become a protagonist. *The Fire and the Rain*, has the abiotic elements in the very title of the play. The play is set on a barren land which is parching in famine. Only rain can help life survive and a fire ceremony, Yajna, is arranged in this regard. But as a contrast to this wasteland, there is a reference to a forest which becomes an off stage character in the play. This paper tries to analyze the representation of the nonhuman world to understand the ecological ideas and vision of the playwright.

Ecocriticism is generally defined as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment that draws its precepts from the social movements that originated in the 1990s. The movement tries to relocate the relationship of the human element with the environment—natural environment (comprising the biotic and the abiotic spheres) and the man made environment—in order to promulgate the possibility of sustainable development. However, for Lawrence Buell any definition for the term is imprecise as the theoretical framework has many "conflicting usages that belies the implication of a coherent category implied by its customary deployment in the singular" and the movement has "generated initiatives or camps that draw on increasingly discrepant archives and critical models". (87) Buell opines that ecocriticism can be characterized "as a two-stage affair since its inception as a self-conscious movement in the early 1990s" (88). The first wave of ecocriticism has dealt with "nonhuman nature in two different although related ways" (Buell 89). The first way has been propounded by "British Romanticism with a genre focus especially on poetry in that tradition (including its twentieth-century Anglo-American filiations), and U.S. nature writing (ditto), with a genre focus especially on the Thoreauvian imprint" (Buell 89). And the second approach is based on the principles of deep ecology, which comprises the view that "human being and human consciousness are thought to be grounded in intimate interdependence with the nonhuman living world" (Buell 90). The second wave, on the other hand "has sought to press far beyond the first wave's characteristic limitations of genre, geography, and historical epoch"(Buell 92). It engages "the whole sweep of Western literary history from antiquity to the present" and "it had also taken root in eastern and southern Asia as well as Anglo-Europe and the Anglophone diaspora" (Buell 92). Buell also observes that "in India, the first generation of eco-critics has taken a special interest in the literatures and philosophical traditions of the subcontinent" (92). Thus, according to Buell, the perspective of ecocriticism in India is rooted in the culture of people. Christine Gerhardt and Christa Grewen-Volpp, however, go ahead to categorise the literary movement into three phases—the first phase which "focused on re-evaluating the genre of nature writing ...

guided by the ideals of wilderness, conservation and individual activism"; the second phase that "considered the politics, genres and environments in terms of race, gender, class and issues of environmental justice" and the third is "characterized by global and planetary perspectives, often focusing on questions of climate change and anthropocene" (413). The duo also goes ahead to assert that there is always a scope of discussion on issues that are beyond ecocriticism but having link to the latter for "an environmentally significant category of analysis" (417). This opens up "analytical potential of such intersections" and one such major issue in which ecocriticism shares "a long-standing interest" is ecofeminism (Gerhardt 417).

Ecofeminism has emerged as the new wave or the third wave feminist movement which links feminism with deep ecology. Deep ecologists have insisted on the need to examine the "the symbolic, psychological, and cultural patterns by which humans have distanced themselves from nature, denied their reality as a part of nature, and claimed to rule over it from outside" for a better appreciation of human life (qtd in Reuther et al. 33). The human world which is ailing in different aspects owes much to its separation and domination of the environment on socio-economic, cultural, psychological and philosophical plane. There is a need to develop a close communion between the humans and other species in this biosphere for a sustainable development of human world order. The ecofeminists go further to stress that a woman shares an inherent bonding with nature unlike their counterpart. And the women share a common platform with nature in the context of violence, repression and subjugation meted out to both. Famous Indian ecofeminist, Vandana Shiva opines that the theory of progress which originated in the Age of Enlightenment is an assertion of two facets which go hand in hand—modern scientific knowledge and economic development—without looking at life. Speaking in the context of Green Revolution she opines that implementers of such development "have reduced the biodiversity of the planet to the four commodities that can be patented, genetically engineered" ("Lie of Growth" 15). Speaking on the politics of food, Shiva points out that the issue of food producing is gendered at various levels. She argues that "Food security must remain in women's hands everywhere" and it should not be left "in the hands of a few transnational corporations [Western patriarchy] with their profit motives food security.... We will resist those who force us to produce and consume in ways that destroy nature and ourselves ("Women and Gender" 31).

Ecofeminism thus is a socio-economic and political movement which draws parallel between women and the environment as both are relegated to the position of the Other. They are commoditized and this process of appropriating both women and the environment for "progress" inculcate violence and repression on both.

Thus, the possibility of intersection of ecocriticism and ecofeminism creates new avenues for reading a text to understand the symbiotic relationship between human and the nonhuman spheres. This paper tries to have such an approach to Karnad's two plays—*Nāga-Mandala* and *The Fire and the Rain*—

and study the symbiotic relationship of flora and fauna with the anthropocentric world specially the women. Girish Karnad is one of the main exponents who have successfully shaped the canon of post-independence Indian Theatre. He has been critically acclaimed for his experimentation with Indian myths, Indian history and folktales. One of the cardinal aspects of his modernity is the manner in which Karnad has challenged the dominant discourses like the Brahminical discourse and the patriarchal discourse. Karnad has received much critical acclaim from the perspective of feminism and postcolonialism. However, little critical focus has been received from the perspective of ecology. This includes Falguni P Desai's reading of the mythical/ ecocritical layers of *Nāga-Mandala*. She asserts the importance of Hindu myths and religious practices which attaches sacredness to natural objects and thereby promotes biodiversity. And Lillykutty Abraham's novel article reads *Nāga-Mandala* from the perspective of Neo-*Tinai* and tries to identify how *tinai* is foregrounded as the play progresses depicting the union of the humans and the nonhumans at different levels. K Muthuram has an article that makes an eco-critical reading of *The Fire and the Rain*. However, a comprehensive vision of the playwright on the natural environment which can be achieved by reading the two plays together remains unexplored. As already stated in the introduction this article tries to understand the representation of the other-than-human world considering its natural entities, occurrences and settings of significance. The fauna as represented in *Nāga-Mandala* and the flora as represented in *The Fire and the Rain* assume the significance of a character in these two plays which are discussed in the following two sections.

## I

*Nāga-Mandala* brings on the urban stage the flavour of the rural Kannada folk theatre. The play gets its title from the traditional folk performance *Nagamandala*. This theatre form is a ritualistic performance that is rooted deep in the Kannada culture just like *Yakshagana*.<sup>1</sup> *Nagamandala* is a "festive occasion when the Naga Dance (*Naga Nryta*) forms a part of the worship (Ranganath 35). This dance drama is the remnant of the totem worship of ancient days.<sup>2</sup> But Karnad's play makes obvious departures from the ritualistic performance to present a modern drama based on a triangular love affair between Rani, the female protagonist, her human husband, Appannna and her non-human lover, a King Cobra, here referred to as Naga. However, the locale of the play is rural India where the people share space with plenty of animals and plants unlike in the urban spheres. Karnad in his Introduction to *Three Plays* writes that the oral tales are:

Narrated by women—normally the older women in the family—... [and] often serve as a parallel system of communication among women in the family. They thus present a distinctly women's understanding of the reality around her..." ("Intro" 314)

Thus, the playwright makes it clear at the very beginning that this is a

female's world and this world lies beyond the structures of written stories. A.K. Ramanujan, to whom Karnad dedicates his *Nāga-Mandala*, calls the folklore "childhood voices" ("Telling Tales" 448) that has, as he says, pervaded "my childhood, my family, my community. It is the symbolic language of the non-literate parts of me and my culture" ("Who Needs Folklore" 532). And the anti-realistic performance tradition of *Nagamandala* offers the perfect ambience for the make belief world of King Cobras who possesses divine powers. The snake can change into human forms and perform supernatural activities in this magical world. Thus, Rani's lover is a king cobra which falls in love with her under the intoxication of a magical root, assumes the shape of a human (her husband) and makes love to her. The play takes ample advantage of the fluidity of folk tales in mixing the real with the unreal, the magical and the elements of fantasy and present the world of the female in contrast to the structured rational world of the male.

Rani, is given into marriage to Appanna as a child. When she reaches the age of menarche, she arrives at her husband's house to lead a conjugal life. But quite ironically, instead of making her the mistress of the house Appanna locks her up in the house and maltreats her. Rani accepts this role of Appanna's cook and maid without being made his sexual partner. Thus, from the very beginning Rani is relegated to the position of the Other. From a carefree life at her father's house, she experiences a sea change upon coming to her husband's place where she lies in captivity and humiliation. Being locked up, Rani feels dejected and low. Rani's only means to escape from this bondage is in her dreams where eagles, stags, golden antlers befriend her and come to her rescue. Quite significantly, we see that Rani easily associates herself with animals. The animals that are mentioned are just out of the grandmother's tales, which generally weave magical world of the unreal and the romantic.

Besides imaginative animals, Rani finds comfort in an elderly village woman, Kurudavva. The latter is supposed to be the friend to her deceased mother-in-law. The old woman sympathizes with her and compares her to a caged bird and Appanna to a wild beast and reptile. The analogy between the tortured animal and the tortured woman is explicit in Kurudavva's comparison. As already mentioned, the play is replete with feminine sensibilities and the manner they respond to the natural world to convey those. There are multiple occasions when references to various animals are made to communicate the feelings. The references to animals can be categorized broadly into two—the domestic and harmless animals and the wild and the harmful ones. The parallel between the domestic animals and the women expound the concept of utility principle in both. Both are to be possessed by the owners. The wild animals Rani dreams about symbolize the desire for freedom, they also stand for vitality to transcend the boundaries of domestication and lead her to the realm of utopia. Appanna's comparison to wild beast also connotes the hierarchy of the human over the animal the sub-human. The proposition suggests that if Appanna had been a good person he wouldn't have acted as an animal. Thus, though the play

represents the parallelism between women and animals on the context of domination, subjugation, and perpetration of violence in taming or domesticating them the broad categorization of the animals fall vulnerable in “colluding in the fiction that the species boundary is a fixed one” (Huggan 152). Huggan here uses the term “species boundary” not in Darwinian sense but refers “to the discursive construction of a strict line between humans and animals”(156).

Kurudavva hands Rani a magical root which the latter is to feed to her husband in order to win over his love. But unfortunately, she throws the magical potion made out of the roots on the Naga. And the latter falls in love with her. The love episode of Naga and Rani as already mentioned has both verbal and nonverbal elements emulating the world of snakes. But they are primarily based on the precepts of totem worship and other common beliefs and superstitions regarding King Cobra and are not based on any scientific reality. The King Cobra (*Ophiophagushannah*) has been listed as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List since 2010. The play composed in 1988 could not anticipate the change in the global habitat making this creature vulnerable which otherwise has been considered sacred since ages. The play adheres to the concept of snake cult prevalent in India. The snake cult has multiple origins like totemistic, mythical, fertility cult due to the similarity of the shape of a hooded snake and a sperm and so on. The worshipping of snakes has also originated out of fear and reverence. The coiled snake or *Kundalini* has often been associated with the concept of oneness of all ‘*Jeeva*’ (life) in this cosmos or the posture of *Nagabandha* is viewed as the symbol of power transmission where the male and the female stand for two opposites in Indian philosophical discourses. Thus, snake worship forms an integral part of Indian culture as many gods and goddesses are also associated with snakes. Lord Shiva also known as *Pashupati* or the lord of the animals is one of the trinity in the Hindu pantheon and his image is always associated with the snake *Vasuki* round his neck. Even Goddesses Durga holds a snake in one of her ten arms. The *Padma Puran* is dedicated to Padmabati, or Manasha who is the Goddess of snakes and *Nag Panchami* is one of the auspicious festivals observed by the Hindus when the cobra also called Naga is worshipped. But the prevalence of this snake worship has failed to protect the species which has become a victim of the march of development that has robbed it of its habitat. Thus reading/performing the play in the present times propagates the need for a sustainable development to preserve the cultural fabric of the country and subsequently preserve biodiversity as opposed to western concept of development. This western concept of development has also been constantly challenged by postcolonial ecocritics like Graham Huggan, Pablo Mukherjee and others.

Karnad depends on Indian popular socio-cultural traditions while representing this non-human animal. Naga assumes the shape of Appanna and visits her at nights when the latter is away making love to his mistress and cheating upon Rani. However, Naga’s true form can be obtained in the reflection in the mirror which Rani sees and gets scared. When Naga makes love to Rani, he

mimes like a cobra and Rani uses the analogy of a bird and a cobra to expound their consummation of love. This dramatic irony portends an image of the hunter and the hunted. Naga here assumes hierarchical position to Rani because Naga is here not a representative of the animal world but the dominant self in the patriarchal structure of the society. This apparent suggestion of the superiority is illusive that gets dismissed at the end which is discussed later.

The nocturnal visits of Naga are not smooth and are interrupted by two animals brought by Appanna, first a watchdog and then a mongoose. Both the animals are kept tied and made to fight each other on the desire of the master. Naga fights the representatives of Appanna and wins Rani as in the norm of the wild. The world of the animals is driven by instinct and the world of man is driven by reason. And man has designated a superior position for himself on the basis of this capability of reasoning. A perfect example of such classification is "The Chain of Being" of the Elizabethan period. In "The Chain of Being" man is positioned above the animals, the animals on the other hand get superior position to plants. Thus, everything that is not governed by reason is rendered powerless and treated as inferior. The world of Rani is driven by instinct too. Thus, even when she sees the reflection of a snake she surrenders to her instinct. This similarity between the animal world and the world of the women draws them together whereas man fails to correspond to the natural world like the women.

Rani's pregnancy is in the order of the natural world but she faces the wrath of patriarchy for following her basic instincts. Appanna beats her up and compels her to face ordeal for her adultery. It is quite significant that Naga who has been towering above other animals all the while surrenders to the anthropocentric patriarchal structure at this point. The cobra does not perform any magic to save Rani. On the contrary, Naga tells Rani to perform the snake ordeal that is to hold the snake and speak the truth. The narrative becomes complicated as truth is not constant here since Rani is unaware of her adultery. Significantly, Rani is to be judged according to the patriarchal structure of the anthropes which does not spare her though Appanna is not interrogated for his adultery. A similar acceptance of the superiority of the anthropocentric world order is seen in the ending of the play.

The snake ordeal actually makes both Rani and Naga realize their subjective positions in the patriarchal structures—both are inferior to the self/Man. Naga accepts his position:

NAGA:....I thought I could become a human....No!...[she is] for one who is forever a man. I shed my skin every season. How could I even hope... to retain the human form? ("Naga" 296)

Naga accepts his limitations. Although ecdysis is not a unique feature of the snakes only, even humans shed skin, but it is a major morphological change among the reptiles. An opaque snake is quite vulnerable and Naga refers to this period of physical weakness which is of no match to the physical strength of man.

This weakness finds its echo in the physical limitations of women during pregnancy or menstruation. However, the play offers double endings. Rani emerges out victorious from the snake ordeal and attains godhood in the eyes of the villagers. Appanna is forced to accept her. But she realizes the distinction between her husband and the biological father of her son but she never divulges it to Appanna. In one ending, the play turns out to be a tragedy. Naga realizes its inferiority to the humans and commits suicide realizing that he would never be able to achieve Rani. This ending snaps the possible bridge between the feminine world and nature though the fruit of their union, Rani's son, continues to thrive. However, in the second ending there is subversion. Rani gives Naga shelter in her long tresses having the full knowledge that the snake is the biological father of her son. This continuation of the relationship is a deliberate defiance of the anthropocentric patriarchal structures on the part of both the woman and the animal and a challenge thrown to Appanna. While the first ending makes *Nāga-Mandala* a tragedy the second ending makes the play a comedy. It shows that the life may remain happy with the peaceful co-existence with other species and only a woman can be in unison with the animal world. A similar philosophy is expounded in *The Fire and the Rain* which is discussed in the next section.

## II

If folktales give the playwright the advantage to weave magic and fantasy, the myths posit a completely different canvas. The myths are highly structured in contrast to the fluid structure of oral tales. Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain* reinterprets human relationships—man's relationship with fellow man, man's relationship with elemental nature and man's relationship with the supernatural—within the structured myths.<sup>3</sup> The main plot presents the love triangle of Paravasu, Vishakha, his wife and Yavakri. Karnad makes an innovation to present Yavakri as a former lover of Vishakha, the unnamed daughter in law of Raibhya in the source text. The subplot presents another love story of Arvasu and Nittilai, the hunter girl. The story of Nittilai is a genuine interpolation of the dramatist that presents a counter narrative of subaltern history that has run parallel to the dominant oral history assumed in the Indian culture.

Karnad reworks the Hindu myths into a modern tragedy even when Indian dramatic theory is devoid of this western dramatic genre. The play opens on a barren draught stricken land with hunger stricken, thirsty people and animals. There is no water and the people from the villages are abandoning their homes in search of food and water elsewhere. Thus from the very opening of the play, we find the elemental nature is antagonistic and is threatening human life and humanity at length. But the attitude to this calamity is quite opposite in the two binary cultures. The king arranges for a *Yajna* ceremony to propitiate Indra and bring rains and appoints Paravasu as the chief priest. Paravasu is thus away from his home for seven years when Yavakri returns from the forest. Yavakri too completes his penance and attains power of universal knowledge just like

Paravasu. But his knowledge does not change his inner self which is driven by hatred and revenge upon Raibhya. He takes advantage of Vishakha's loneliness and dejected mood.

The barren land corresponds to the barren self of Vishakha who has been earnestly waiting for compassion and human love. Yavakri stops her on her way home near the bank of a dry river from where the latter collects some water after scooping the ground. Vishakha is at first hesitant to talk but later surrenders to the intimacy of Yavakri. Vishakha's hesitation arises not only from the fact that she is a married woman but also out of awe as she knows that Yavakri has returned from the forest after attaining the power of Knowledge. Vishakha's cultural upbringing prompts her to admire Yavakri for his perseverance and power. But Yavakri breaks her romantic fascination regarding penance in the forest:

YAVAKRI: ... life in the jungle is sheer hell. Flies, giant ants, beetles, pests, leeches attacking at the suspicion of moisture, vipers lurking in the bowls of dust. The relentless heat . not demons but mosquitoes to torture you— ("Fire and Rain" 119)

Yavakri's account gives a realistic picture of the hardships of the forest life which gives no comfort to the listener. He even continues in the same mode in his description of the encounter with the supernatural.

YAVAKRI: .... And when the god disappeared, nothing was left behind to prove he had ever been there. I looked around. The same old black scorpion. The same horned chameleon. The shower of the bird shit around me. So was it a hallucination...("Fire and Rain" 120)

Thus, the forest is a maleficent one to Yavakri whereas the same forest appears to be benevolent to Nittilai, which has been discussed later in this section. Thus, while depicting the flora, Karnad incorporates the binary of the two social discourses which run parallel to each other even in the present day. Vishakha is presented as a powerful woman with agency who dares to violate the codes of the society to make love out of the wedlock. But while Vishakha is earnest in her desire to make love, Yavakri's proposition is only a means to take revenge upon Paravasu and Raibhya. Thus, she is no longer an individual but a possession of her husband. She gets a similar treatment from Yavakri and Paravasu. Both have used her body to achieve their goals. Paravasu has utilized her body "like her experimenter, an explorer. As an instrument in a search" of immortality ("Fire and Rain" 123). When a greater scope arrives with the invitation of the fire sacrifice he desolates her immediately. And both try to take possession of her body paying least heed to her mind.

Both Yavakri and Paravasu hold woman and nature in similar attitude. Both perceive the Nature as antagonistic and wild and it needs to be controlled. Paravasu says to Vishakha:

PARAVASU: ....I went because the fire sacrifice is a formal rite. Structured. It involves no emotional acrobatics from the participants. The process itself will bring Indra to me. And if anything goes wrong...It has to be set right by a man. By me. That's why when the moment comes I shall confront Indra in silence. As an equal." ("Fire and Rain" 141)

Paravasu wants to parallel the god of rains, Indra. Significantly the gods of elemental nature are all male whereas the earth is described as "dharitri" (or one that holds) as the female. Paravasu's desire to parallel Indra in power can be linked to his desire to control the elemental forces and thereby be immortal. Yavakri too completes penance and possesses magical water (another elemental force) which he preserves to take revenge upon Paravasu and Raibhya.

The contrast to this attitude is found in Nittilai the hunter girl who belongs to group of the socially secluded. Like any tribal girl, Nittilai is well conversant to the ways of the wild animals of the forest as she can perceive all the animals from their footprints or smell or sound. Not only are the 'two worlds, running parallel to each other, totally different in "the religious beliefs and practices" but also in their attitude to the elemental nature (Chatterjee 169). The world of the tribes is marked by invoking 'deity', getting 'possessed' with spirits and 'spirit answers' and simple philosophy of life that is based on basic instincts ("Fire and Rain" 116). So, when Arvasu is to ask Nittilai's hand in marriage he has to announce before all that

ARVASU: 'I want to take her as my wife. I am potent. I can satisfy all her needs...' ("Fire and Rain" 110)

This is contrary to the way of the dominant discourse where match making is more of an economic affair than a biological one. Nittilai is conceived as the daughter of the forest. The presentation of the forest and its intimacy with Nittilai is a faithful account of the reality as the hunters share real knowledge of the forest. The Forest legislations like the Forest Act of 1865 and 1878, Forest Policy resolution 1894 and Indian Forest Act 1927 that were formulated in the British regime have ignored the tribals and their interest. The resolutions have only focused on the economic benefits of the colonial masters. It facilitated the destruction of the forests for the construction of roads and other projects of development profiting the colonial masters. The National Forest Policy drafted on 1987, reviewed the British policies and recognised the role of the tribals and the rural population who are dependent on the forest for their daily activities and in return play a positive role in "maintaining forests and environment in unambiguous terms and not merely in its implications" (Kulkarni 2145). Thus, community and the forest share a symbiotic relationship.

The forest becomes an offstage character which supports Nittilai in all spheres. Even in this hostile time, Nittilai is never out of food or water. When Arvasu is betrayed by his elder brother and thrown out half dead, he is rescued by an actors' troupe. But he gets new life from Nittilai. Actually, it is for Nittilai that the troupe gives indulgence to Arvasu as the latter becomes dependent on her for

food and other aids during the famine. Nittilai even extends her compassionate healing touch to the actor manager's family and provides food to the children of the actor manager. And this is only because for Nittilai the forest is a benevolent one and not maleficent as it is perceived by Yavakri. Nittilai runs away from her family in order to save Arvasu. And her brother and husband arrive to hunt her down because she has violated the norms of their society. Even in this crisis, she depends upon the forest to hide where she will "be safe enough" as "the jungle's like a home to" her. Arvasu decides to perform in a play the role of Vritra in order to hide from the hunters ("Fire and Rain" 162). However, Nittilai is hunted down by her brother and husband when she steps out of the jungle to help Arvasu. Arvasu, while performing the role of Vrita identifies Paravasu's betrayal with that of Vritra and goes beyond the control.<sup>4</sup> The situation degenerates into chaos. Nittilai comes forward and pulls out the mask of Vritra to help him regain his balance. But in this process, she gets identified and killed.

Nittilai thus stands unique not only to Yavakri and Paravasus whose sole aim is to obtain elemental powers to fulfill personal selfish desires but also stands apart from her own community which too pivots around cold lifeless structures of society. Both the social structures are in contrast to humanity and love. She is here twice the Other. The subaltern society too fails to comprehend the liberalism of Nittilai. Nittilai seems to have subsumed the true essence of the natural world where primary task is to sustain life. She becomes the sacrificial lamb upon which the violence is committed with the thought to propitiate the gods and serve humanity. Thus, even though the text upholds the philosophy of union between human and nature for sustainability of life, the appropriation of the sacrifice of Nittilai breaks that hope and makes the text vulnerable from an ecofeminist perspective.

In conclusion, it may be said that the playwright's vision of the relationship between the human world and the natural world is shaped by Indian cultural and philosophical traditions. However, the texts are also interrogative in natures which expose the discourse of development propagated by capitalist forces that has victimised the fauna and flora. The performance of these two texts gives us the picture that rural/tribal India lives in close proximity to nature. The plays also highlight that in the human world it is the woman who shares greater bonding to nature in comparison to man. But the feminine world that is driven by basic instinct as in the natural world is often subjugated by men as they oppose the structures of patriarchy that is evident in *Nāga-Mandala* and the structures of both Brahmanism and patriarchy that is evident in *The Fire and the Rain*. Both the plays actually highlight how the psychological and physical states of anthropes are dependent on the environment. This vision continues in his last two plays where the natural environment is replaced by man-made environment. Both *Broken Images* and *The Wedding Album* explore the influence of technology on human lives.

### Notes :

- <sup>1</sup> Karnad experiments with Yakshagana in Hayavadana.
- <sup>2</sup> In Naga dance, the performer paints himself like the cobra and comes out in a well matching costume. H. K. Ranganath points out that the emphasis of this performance is not on the mere entertainment as the spectator and the performer all take part in the performance.
- <sup>3</sup> The Fire and the Rain actually intertwines two myths—the myth of Yavakri, and the myth of Indra and Vritra. But the myth of Yavakri is mainly focused upon in this paper. Yavakri, son of Rishi Bharadwaja, violates the Brahminical tradition of gaining wisdom and resolves to obtain knowledge directly from the gods in order to surpass Rishi Raibhya and his sons, Paravasu and Aravasu. He goes to the forest and performs penance to please Indra. After obtaining the power of knowledge, Yavakri molests the daughter-in-law of Raibhya out of revenge. Raibhya, in anger, invokes the Kritya spirit that devours Yavakri. Bharadwaja, upon learning of his son's death, curses Raibhya that he would die in the hands of his own son. The curse gets fulfilled when Paravasu kills his father out of mistake. Paravasu instead of performing father's last rites, necessary for penitence after patricide, orders Aravasu to do the duties and himself goes back to the sacrifice, which he is conducting for the king. But later Paravasu betrays his younger brother and gets him thrown out of the sacrificial ground by the king's men on the allegation that the latter has committed patricide. Being cast out, Arvasu goes to the forest, prays to the gods, earns boons and restores Yavakri, Bharadwaja and Raibhya back to life. Paravasu is made to forget his evil act and order is restored at the end.
- <sup>4</sup> The second myth enacted in the play is that of Indra and Vritra. Indra and Vritra are brothers, sons of Rishi Tvastr. However, Indra slays Vritra.

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## **“A-DEATH-WITHIN-THE-SELF—THE PHENOMENAL EXPULSION OF EXPECTATION”: READING NARRATIVES OF MISCARRIAGE**

**Bonjyotshna Saikia**

### **Abstract**

In a patriarchal culture, pregnancy is celebrated and valorised, while miscarriage is made invisible and tabooed. A conspicuous silence is evidently linked to miscarriages even though it is the most prevalent pregnancy-related health issue. In a close reading of two memoirs of miscarriage: Elizabeth McCracken's *An Exact Replica of a Figment of My Imagination* (2008), and Ariel Levy's *The Rules Do Not Apply* (2017), this paper examines how the authors use their narratives to foreground their plight. Drawing theoretical insights from Alison Reiheld, Ann Cahill, and William Ruddick, among others, the paper argues that these memoirs not only narrate the typically repressed episodes of miscarriage but also endeavour to assign a cultural legitimacy to the representation and the intimate articulations of miscarriage thereby destigmatising it.

**Keywords :** Motherhood, Miscarriage, Memoir, Infertility, Pregnancy, Destigmatisation

### **Introduction**

“Your absence is inconspicuous;  
Nobody can tell what I lack....  
None of them seem to notice.  
Their shrill, gravelly gossip’s funneled off.  
Now silence after silence offers itself.”

Excerpt from Sylvia Plath’s

“Parliament Hill Fields”

Through these lines Sylvia Plath captures the unutterable silence around pregnancy loss. Written just a week after her miscarriage, the poem is a rendition of the seemingly invisible pain that surrounds the loss. The phenomenon of miscarriage is very common which affects one in four pregnancies.<sup>1</sup> Clinically, miscarriage is defined as “the spontaneous loss of a foetus before the 20th week of pregnancy” (US National Library of Medicine). However, this determined period of gestation to be considered a miscarriage differs among countries.<sup>2</sup>

Michelle Obama in her memoir *Becoming* (2018) speaks about her miscarriage and the intense agony that she undergoes. She shares her uncertainty

about the loss, as she “didn’t know how common miscarriages were because we don’t talk about them”, as a result, she blamed herself and felt lost (Obama 138). But it turns out that it “happens all the time, to more women than you’d ever guess, given the relative silence around it” (*ibid*). She laments the lack of expression about this particular issue among women showcasing her critique for the conspicuous silence surrounding miscarriage. Though almost 10 to 20 percent of pregnancies end in miscarriage while the sufferers experience grief in silence.<sup>3</sup> Sarah Miller in her essay “The Moral Meanings of Miscarriage” (2015), states that the silence shrouding miscarriage can be cultural, interpersonal, and historical silences (Miller 142). An intricate nexus of the loss of agency and a loss of control, miscarriage usually lacks an external causal agent.<sup>4</sup> This lack creates a sense of guilt and self-betrayal, which Miller links to the moral aspect of miscarriage.

This silence is expressed distinctly in the various graphic pathographies of miscarriage, for instance Phoebe Potts’ *Good Eggs* (2010), Paula Knight’s *The Facts of Life* (2017), Chari Pere’s *Miscarried* (2017) to name a few, illustrates the experiences of miscarriage through verbal-visual medium allowing them to recreate the complex emotional state of their mind. However, the taboo and shame surrounding miscarriage is reflected only in a few autobiographical narratives. This paper takes into account two memoirs of miscarriage: Elizabeth McCracken’s *An Exact Replica of a Figment of My Imagination* (2008), and Ariel Levy’s *The Rules Do Not Apply* (2017). The rationale behind choosing these two texts, published almost a decade apart from each other, is to reflect on the experiences of miscarriage and the reiterated silence around it which has not changed even after so many years. What these two texts justify is that the plight of someone undergoing this loss has remained the same with miscarriage still seen as a tabooed female health quandary. McCracken’s book is a series of parallel narratives of how she deals with the loss, and at the same time she prepares to embrace a new life with uncertainty. Her narrative alternates between the past pregnancy and the present. She presents two contrasting pictures of a woman and her partner about to have a baby for the first time, and also that of a woman who had already lost one. She delineates the way she attempts to recover from the loss and the discourses around her thereby illustrating the anxieties about her second pregnancy. The readers can feel the skepticism and the fear of losing a child again. Similarly, Levy shares the experiences of her miscarriage and the guilt that she carried along for many years, unable to start anew. In Levy’s book, she describes how her life takes a different turn with the expectation of the baby’s arrival but which is eventually shattered by the loss of her baby. It is a very gloomy account of Levy’s life with the loss of her baby, spouse, and her home all at the same time. Levy’s memoir addresses the twin agony of pregnancy loss and the lack of support from her partner. Being married to a woman, she has to conceive with a male friend. She lacks the support of a partner who would share her grief. Hence, the narrative replete with Levy’s lonely attempts to cope with her loss. Both the narratives foreground the deeply intimate nature of a miscarriage.

### “Speckles of self-blame? Steadfast stigma?”: Miscarriage and Guilt

Jessica Zucker raises a series of questions regarding the absence of narratives on the experience of miscarriage. In her memoir *I Had a Miscarriage: A Memoir, a Movement* (2021), she embarks on a journey to dispel the silence, shame, and stigma around miscarriage. In her column *Motherlode*, she writes about the enervating experience when she saw her “baby slid out. She dangled from me mere centimetres from the toilet-bowl water. My window-clad house should have shattered from the pitch of my prolonged primordial howl. It didn’t. I did.” (“Saying it Loudly” 2014). Zucker questions the “self-blame” or “stigma” or “cultural shame” that a miscarriage brings along (*ibid.*). She accepts that this is a hard topic for people to discuss, but the talk about miscarriage is the only way to lessen the grief that comes with it.

In her graphic novel *The Pregnancy ≠ Childbearing Project : A Phenomenology of Miscarriage*, Jennifer Scuro argues that many facets of pregnancy become inconspicuous when childbirth is the exclusively sanctioned denouement of the process<sup>5</sup>. The childbearing teleology creates the belief in the moral purpose of the female body and the discourse of ‘failure’ if pregnancies do not end with a child. The whole process of the ‘failure’ takes over the experience of the person, and she is simply ‘advised’ to move on and ‘try again’. The ‘product’ (child) is the most important element of this process, thus erasing the other aspects of pregnancy which might include a failed pregnancy, the labour pain that she might have to undergo, or the whole idea of a woman not wanting to bear a child. Thus, according to Scuro, the romanticised perception of the childbearing teleology seeks to “validate the *productive* womanhood, naturalised ideas of maternity, and *functional femininity*” (Scuro 192). The agony of the one losing their child even before it is fully formed is irreparable which they have to deal with in secret. The birth of a child is only one of the so many possibilities of pregnancy. By discussing this hushed experience, Scuro attempts to dissipate the shame surrounding miscarriage. She states that the typical experience of all pregnancies is “expulsion, *a-death-within-the-self*—the phenomenal expulsion of expectation” (Scuro xii). To elucidate this, she refers to the phenomenon of “emptying out” which is supposedly linked to every pregnancy, but this process may not be the end after all (*ibid.*). The process of being pregnant is transformative, whatever the end is. Being pregnant creates a process of expropriation of her body, denying intimacy, with “the demand to satisfy a need to touch her belly” (199). LaChance Adams equates this process of expropriation to “guiltedness”, and differentiates the notion with Martin Heidegger’s belief of anxiety as the most genuine disposition<sup>6</sup>.

Scuro reiterates the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas in that she prioritises the Other over oneself. The process of one’s subjectivity is always subverted with the constant sense of the centrality for the Other. This centrality determines the way subjectivity is shaped and speaks of the inability of subjectivity to be self-possessed. One fails to go back to being their former self after the Other’s death. The death in a miscarriage shapes this subjectivity even more because of the

proximity of the dead, the death of a part of the body, as Scuro writes: "death, even though it is not my own, undoes me, interrogates me, and puts 'me' in question" (201). This very guiltedness leads to grief, and it "sticks to the body in the loss and survivability of what has come to pass" (233). The grief in this case moves beyond the guilt of a survivor; it is the grief of the loss of someone from the body itself, which alters the person experiencing it indelibly.

In *The Exact Replica of a Figment of my Imagination* (2008), the guilt is evident in McCracken's choice of doctors. Time and again, she revisits those days in Bordeaux when she was expecting Pudding (their stillborn) and trying to figure out the mistakes that she might have committed: "Of course it occurs to me that Pudding might have lived if I'd stuck with either Dr. Bergerac or Dr. Baltimore" (McCracken 34). The guilt is evident in almost every section of the book:

Thiswas all my fault. I still believe that, a conviction so awful and unshakable...I could not put my finger on what I had done wrong. Eaten something. Failed to eat something. Rested too much or exercised too much. Got pregnant too old. Was smug. He died inside of me: of course it was my fault. It happened on my watch. (McCracken 112)

When the autopsy report of Pudding's death arrived, McCracken was confident that it would state "maternal oblivion" as the cause of death. And she wondered if she did something wrong or could have "done exactly that differently" (73). This constant blame inflicted upon the self creates a series of guilt hindering the normal flow of life. Similarly, in *The Rules Do Not Apply* (2017), Levy succumbs to this guilt after her first pregnancy loss, as she felt that it was her decision to go to Mongolia that has changed everything: "I had boarded a plane out of vanity and selfishness, and the dark Mongolian sky had punished me" (Levy 115). Comments from people like "you'll have another one" do not help. The effort to get rid of the guilt is evident in the series of trips to doctors just to make sure that the miscarriage had happened on its own right and not because of her trip to Mongolia: "I WENT TO SEE DOCTORS, specialists, to get vial after vial of blood taken and tested" (119). She went to the best of doctors to assure herself of the placental abruption as the cause of her miscarriage. She was determined to "pay anything" to undo the situation that has led to her misery (120). The sense of guilt creeps in even after she somehow gets over the loss: "*You don't fly to Mongolia pregnant*" (128). This self-blame is so much pertinent that the narrator accepts her trip to Mongolia as the sole reason of her loss despite the assurance by her doctors that the miscarriage would have happened even if she stayed where she was. Her guilt was further aggravated by the fact that the baby's father has donated his sperm and expects her to take care as she constantly worries about his reaction that "the baby's father...would never be able to forgive me, would never give me his sperm or his love or his money ever again" (Levy 115). She is constantly poked by a sense of guilt not only for the father, but also for cheating her partner Lucy. This guilt along with the grief pulls her down the spiral.

The constant sense of self-blame is evident in these narratives which make the readers question about the lack of awareness and expression surrounding pregnancy loss. This is further aggravated by the people's responses around them. A series of discourses about the carelessness or irresponsibility on the part of the narrator is created by the people around her: "They want to know what they have to eat to keep from being me" (Levy 152). People tell her not to "get on any planes" the next time she is pregnant (*ibid.*). They do not want to believe that it is not *her* fault that the miscarriage has happened (emphasis added). There is a pervading sense of gloom and hopelessness in the eyes of people who blames her for her situation. They are concerned more about the 'mistakes' that she might have committed, rather than her grief for the loss. Scuro's assertion that this guilt leads to grief is intensified by the discourses around them. The narrators experience constant interrogation and denial of their existence in the face of their loss.

The phenomenological reading of the texts offers an understanding of the deeply unnerving psyche of the sufferers. These texts not only "visibilises the author's struggles with miscarriage but also foregrounds the issues involved in the autobiographical representations of miscarriage as a tabooed female health quandary" (Venkatesan and Murali 2020). The physical pain, along with the psychological pain is significantly portrayed in these texts. A study conducted by the Albert Einstein College of Medicine states that almost 47 percent of women were haunted by guilt following their miscarriage (Venkatesan and Murali 2020). This is due to the fact that failure to give birth is also linked to a perceived sense of failure to fulfil obligations towards the family in continuing the lineage.

### **"People don't like to hear it": Reading the silence around miscarriage**

Ann J. Cahill in her essay "Miscarriage and Intercorporeality" examines the various ways in which successful pregnancy and miscarriage varies. According to Cahill, this is due to the socially constructed phenomenon of a successful pregnancy. They differ in the one being a "noisy" lived experience, and the other being culturally "silent" (Cahill 45). In the case of a miscarriage, the sufferer "does not see her experience analysed, visually represented, or discussed; there is no barrage of advice...they find themselves, and the broad spectrum of their emotional responses, absent from cultural conversations regarding pregnancy and childbirth" (*ibid.*). The experience of miscarriage is usually misunderstood, difficult to articulate, and isolating. As a result of the silence, the information regarding miscarriage can be under-informed, causing severe psychic harm to the ones experiencing it (Cahillo1). Jessica Zucker in her blog for *The Guardian* explains this nexus of silence and shame thus:

This strident trifecta of silence, stigma and shame that shroud the topic of pregnancy loss prevent open dialogue and emotional support about these physical changes. This can complicate often already fraught relationships with our bodies, as women burrow their reactions, which can mutate into guilt, embarrassment and self-blame. (Zucker 2019)

Lisa Hanasono in a heart-wrenching TEDx BGSU talk entitled “The M-Word: Shattering the Silence on Miscarriage” (2018) speaks about the tumult of feelings and the sense of betrayal by her body after her miscarriage. This feeling of betrayal is manifested in the ineffectiveness of the agency, the loss of trust in one’s own body, as it supposedly failed to perform what it is biologically determined to do. She speaks about this whole community or a secret society who had been affected by pregnancy loss, suffering in silence. Hanasono states that the media has been misrepresenting stories of pregnancy loss. They trivialise the portrayal of grief following a miscarriage, depicting a woman grieving for a few seconds and moving on with her life the next day. Pushing such an intense experience to the background helps nurture a casual attitude towards pregnancy loss. Hence, these personal narratives of miscarriage is crucial as it breaks the silence around the topic. It creates a sense of community by articulating the lived realities following pregnancy loss, and foregrounds the state of helplessness that miscarriage engenders which is compounded by the indifference of the people.

Dealing with pregnancy loss can be terrifying, as those experiencing this loss seek answers and reasons. And if they do not find answers, it is in a way self-satisfying as there is no one to blame for, but there is a looming sense of fear associated with the next pregnancy. But those who did find out the reason (medical or external event or accident) for their loss, they often turn inwards and are overwhelmed by feelings of shame and guilt, which again sustains that silence around pregnancy loss. In her memoir, McCracken enumerates the series of dilemmas that she had to undergo before trying to have a baby for the second time. The sense of fear pervades and she decides to remain silent about her second pregnancy. This time, she decides not to share the news of her pregnancy with anyone or to try and find out the baby’s gender. She resorts to phrases like “I *hope* we can have another child” instead of “we *will* have another child” (McCracken 28). Her second pregnancy is haunted by the death of the first. She “creeps toward that time” when she had her first pregnancy loss (38). She hopes for a child but also expects the worst: “We wanted another child. We wanted to fill those clothes. And so, without even looking, we packed them away, three boxes full. We could throw them out later, if we had to” (43). She starts to hate the place associated with the death of her child. This is evident in her narrative as she describes her hatred for the place and the people for nearly two pages.

Similarly, Levy depicts this fear as she is not prepared to conceive once again. She attempts to find reasons for her loss, she questions her decisions of the past. Somewhere deep-down she feels that her trip to Mongolia had brought about that doom in her life. Seeking answers, she juggles between her place of work and her trips to doctors. The readers witness a beautiful bond with one of her doctors in Mongolia. This relationship is due to the fact that the doctor understands her pain. He has seen her at her most vulnerable moment but it may also be due to the fact that he is a total stranger, different from the people around her.

Hilde Lindemann in her article “Miscarriage and the Stories We Live By” (2015) states that “any miscarriage can be epistemically opaque” (Lindemann 88). Rather than trying hard to console with stock responses, Lindemann suggests that “it’s often wisest for others not to assume they know how to understand a given one, much less how to respond to it. Here as elsewhere, the best thing the third party might do is to ask the woman, “What are you going through?” The question is both an invitation to the woman to tell her story and a promise that the person asking will *listen* to the story” (*ibid*). It is crucial to note how Lindemann emphasises on the importance of being a listener on the part of the people which might soothe the person going through the trauma of miscarriage. They do not seek attention, rather they want us to know their pain, their conflicts. This pain is different from the pain of death. The difference is that it is a pain which other people somehow fail to understand because they have not seen the dead baby. But for the mother, it is a part of her body. She felt the breath, the touch and the life that was forming within her. This feeling that someone is there to listen to their suffering is purgative and speaks volume of the sense of relief that accompanies the narrative. The trauma of miscarriage can be palliated in the form of attentive listening: “I want to hear about every dead baby, everywhere in the world. I want to know their names, Christopher, Strick, Jonathan. I want their mothers to know about Pudding” (McCracken 90). It can be a balm for the woman grieving someone who does not exist for the people around her. McCracken depicts the joy she experiences when she receives consolation from her friends through email, and at the same time states her annoyance for some of the mails. She talks about one friend in particular, who mails her after a month of her loss, lacking empathy.

Usually, the woman undergoing miscarriage experiences disenfranchised grief, to borrow Kenneth Dosa’s term, where they cannot express their grief openly and as a result cannot be mourned or acknowledged. The paradox evident in the experience is when the inability to articulate her grief kills the woman from the inside, and at the same time, her failure to capture her grief in words so that people can understand what she is going through. For instance, in her memoir, McCracken expresses her husband’s concern that the photo of their dead child would turn into a fetish, as the photo was not of their child, but of his body. But at the same time, she does not want to repress the death of that child, she wanted his death to be what it is, something that people would know without having to explain it to them. A similar concern is echoed when Levy expresses that she “wanted people to know...[p]eople don’t like to hear it” (Levy 49).

It is the reactions from others that can leave a deep imprint on the minds of the one undergoing such a loss. The narrators enumerate the stock responses from people which aggravates their pain. One of the most common responses seen in both the narratives, “you can still get pregnant” traumatises the narrators as it seems to trivialise their grief. This grief cannot be expressed and people fail to discern it, in turn, creating a distance between them. The failure to express can be linked to the self-blame that the narrators experienced after their loss. This

creates a nexus of guilt and blame on their part culminating in a state of mental instability.

The instability can be caused because of the involvement of the woman with the foetus or the postpartum changes in her body. As William Ruddick terms it, getting involved with the foetus and having imaginary conversation is a phenomenon of *Proleptic* relationship (Ruddick 97). This is the process when the mother treats the foetus as an individual, as a human being.<sup>7</sup> This phenomenon of giving the foetus personhood leads to a severe psychic harm if a miscarriage happens. Byron J Stoyles observes that “even before birth, a foetus can occupy a place in our social world insofar as we come to think and act as though the foetus is already a baby or child” (94). This in turn is “shaped by social and cultural norms surrounding pregnancy and parenthood” (95), and as such, the very notion of a miscarriage is linked to the would-be mother’s carelessness and irresponsibility. Women are held responsible if anything happens to the unborn child, as child-bearing becomes a cultural phenomenon. McCracken here seems to form a proleptic relationship with Pudding when she gossips with him, or tells him what is on the menu whenever she visits a restaurant.

Bodies change after pregnancy, but the grief that accompanies a miscarriage is something that even the bodies fail to hide. The body acts as an agency in making the woman realise that she has lost her child even before it could see the world: “[t]hese bodies are still changed, and they continue to change, but they are now also imprinted with a life lost” (Zucker 2014). The moment when breast produces milk with no baby to feed seems futile and adds to the already existing sadness. This is evident when Levy experiences that her breasts were still producing milk like “sadness was leaking out of me from every orifice” (Levy 118). The body behaves as a postpartum body does, but with no baby. These changes, both psychological and physical, acts as a barrier for the woman to move on, to adapt to her new circumstances. Hence, there is an urgent need for the pain to be recognised. Support from the partner (who bears the same amount of grief) is not enough. She needs to be empathised by the people who should try and treat this death like any other. She should be allowed a space to mourn her loss and acknowledged for the same.

### **“Stuck in a chronological bubble”: End of an old life or start of a new?**

Alison Reiheld in her phenomenal essay on miscarriage calls it a ”liminal event”, which places the once-pregnant woman in ”a space between not being a parent and being a parent with respect to that particular child who might have been” (11). This is a process between childlessness and motherhood filled with a sense of hope in case of women having fertility issues. But miscarriage pushes her into a liminal state. The future is already decided when we expect to bring another human being into our life. Things are planned accordingly. The hope for a new life shatters when that child never comes into being.

The narrators are left trying to figure out how to live without that child, around whom they have planned their existence. They are trapped, as McCracken says, “in a chronological bubble” (112). There is a sense of nostalgia in almost every passage. The narrators could not help, but link their present to the times when they were pregnant. For instance, Levy describes her intense agony when certain objects and memories takes her back to the moments when she was still expecting to be a mother. The blue whale towel, for instance which she had bought in one of her trips, acts as a constant reminder to the fact that she once carried a child, who is no longer with her; or the photo that she took of her son during the ten minutes of his life, of her life as a mother. In an interview with Terry Gross, Levy accepts that she was obsessed with the photo as she “looked at it obsessively, and I tried to get other people to look at it, because I just felt insane” (“Reflections on the Guilt and Grief of Miscarriage” 2017). The one object associated with the dead child can become a fetish, which is why McCracken’s husband did not allow her to take any picture of their stillborn. However, despite their efforts to move forward, McCracken could not escape the pain of going back to the past when three boxes filled with Pudding’s clothes arrived. These clothes which she bought for the child when she was in Bordeaux brings in a sense of nostalgia and longing for that child. For Levy, the process of coping with the grief proved to be a daunting task due to her ‘unconventional’ pregnancy. Sharing her life with Lucy, and her womb with Acropolis made things more difficult for her. With Lucy being an alcoholic, and the baby’s father being away, Levy struggles to bring her life together after the loss. It is only the solace of Dr. John and his emails and the baby’s photo that kept her sanity. The relationship with Lucy further deteriorates as Levy has to explain the former’s role in the entire process:

“Lucy resented my gratitude for the baby’s father. She worried about her role in our family: “he’s the father, you’re the mother, what the hell am I?” I told her, to the baby, she’d be the real parent —that at present, biology seemed like a big deal, but once our son was among us he would be closest to the people he lived with, his parents.” (Levy 107)

But after the miscarriage, Levy was “alone and unmoored”, she had no one to share her grief with as Lucy is sent to rehab for her addiction, and the child’s father is away and contacted her only through email (131). She falls apart and is unable to move on with the grief. Reading these texts, one of the major themes that is evident is the social construction of femininity and motherhood enforced through various discourses. In *The Second Sex* (1953), Simone De Beauvoir argues that the whole idea of “feminine” is a social construct. In her famous lines: “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman...It is civilisation as a whole that produces this creature...which is described as feminine”, Beauvoir delineates how it is only through cultural conditioning that being “feminine” equates to “becoming” through the various discourses (273). Their gender becomes a performance, as women have to mould themselves to the gender expectations by patriarchy. The authors discussed, give voice to the various women who ‘fail’ to internalise the gender roles and to the gender expectations demanded of them. The whole idea of motherhood as the end of being a woman has been extolled

through histories, religion, media. As Hanazono has discussed, the role played by the media is crucial in that it shapes the mindsets of the people in such a way that they are blind-sighted by any other prospect besides having a child in case of pregnancies.

These exalted notions of motherhood and pregnancy are further intensified by the language used with regard to pregnancy loss. Language about pregnancy loss also implies a notion of failure, a blame on the part of the mother carrying the child. Words like "miscarriage" itself suggests the failure to carry, somehow implying that it is the negligence that leads to the loss. Medical terminologies like 'blighted ovum' —translated as 'rotten egg' — or 'incompetent cervix', 'failed pregnancy' carry negative connotations used in relation to pregnancy loss.

McCracken's *An Exact Replica of a Figment of my Imagination* (2008) and Ariel Levy's *The Rules Do Not Apply* (2017) investigates the diverse aspects of miscarriage. Though published almost a decade apart, these texts reiterate sufferings faced by someone undergoing pregnancy loss, and justify how the situation has not changed. The narrators project their experiences and render a voice to this oft unheard and unsaid dimension of pregnancy. These narratives portray the psychosomatic tumult of pregnancy loss with a new vigour and tenacity. A raw honesty is evident in the narration of their experiences inscribing the psychological and medical dimensions of pregnancy loss, thereby deconstructing the myth of motherhood and destigmatizing miscarriage. Despite being personal narratives, these texts are crucial in the understanding of the often silenced aspect of pregnancy and the grief that accompanies a miscarriage. Their experience helps in giving voice to the secret community of parents who have experienced this loss and have no one to share their grief with. These narratives have paved ways for a series of responses and empathy for those experiencing the unseen loss. As Robert J. Lifton asserts, the pathographies are mediums to project the traumatic experiences of the patients by outwardly expressing it through their writings<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, the narratives do not only help the one suffering, but help others experiencing the same to form an emotional bond, thereby creating a sort of community.

### **Notes :**

- <sup>1</sup> The American Pregnancy Association estimates that approximately one in four pregnancies ends in a miscarriage which means that each year millions of people are affected by pregnancy loss.
- <sup>2</sup> Hochchild, et. al. in the revised glossary on ART Terminology stressed the need of a common nomenclature of the ever expanding definitions of infertility and miscarriages.
- <sup>3</sup> A study conducted by the Mayo Clinic has concluded that nearly 10 to 20 percent of pregnancies end in miscarriages, and it is one of the most prevalent pregnancy-related health issues in the world.
- <sup>4</sup> According to Sarah Miller, miscarriage is intricately linked to bear the responsibility of loss on the part of the woman. But she opines that it is not correct

to blame oneself just because someone else is not responsible. This is a complicated process of loss of agency as it "seem[s] like it is both you and not you who acts" (145).

- <sup>5</sup> Sarah LaChance Adams states how Scuro critiques the childbearing teleology of the tree that bears fruit containing the seed for the next tree, and argues that in case of human-female bodies, this whole concept of the 'natural end' is fused together to the 'healthy' female body.
- <sup>6</sup> Heidegger's belief that anxiety is the most genuine temper is based on the fact that it divulge our perception of our own inescapable end. But guiltedness tells us how we do not own even ourselves in this very life.
- <sup>7</sup> Hilde Lindemann states that prolepsis as a literary device is "the treating of a future state of affairs as if it already existed"(89).
- <sup>8</sup> Pathographies are writings about illness and the experiences which in way is a psychological reconstruction that involves the search for meanings and patterns. Hence, these narratives not only seek to be testimonies of how appalling it is to be ill, but also are documents which helps to alter that appalling experience into something that can be healed.

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## ***BI NOW, GAY LATER OR GAY NOW, BI LATER : A CLOSE READING OF CINNAMON GARDENS***

**Monoj K. Hazarika**

### **Abstract**

This article examines Shyam Selvadurai's novel *Cinnamon Gardens* in terms of its protagonist's bisexuality. Temporally located in 1927 in colonial Ceylon, the novel explores the changing political dynamics of the island nation in the early twentieth century, and how the principal characters engage with their individual issues of self, identity, and alienation. The article's focus is the protagonist Balendran Navaratnam and his 'sexual behaviour' and 'sexual identity'. It engages with exploring different 'nuances' – 'enforced' or otherwise- of Balendran's bisexuality.

**Keywords :** bisexuality, homosexuality, Kinsey scale, identity, alienation, Ceylon.

*Bisexuality immediately doubles your chances for a date on Saturday night.<sup>1</sup>*

- Woody Allen

This paper seeks to explore Sri Lankan-Canadian novelist Shyam Selvadurai's *Cinnamon Gardens* (1998) in terms of its depiction of the protagonist's bisexuality. Selvadurai's first novel *Funny Boy* (1994) situated a young boy's journey of self-realization as he begins to comprehend his homosexuality amid the growing racial conflicts between the Sinhalese and the Tamils in the 1980s' Colombo. Selvadurai's second fictional work is the historical novel *Cinnamon Gardens*— temporally rooted in 1927 Ceylon — the colonial nomenclature with which Sri Lanka went by until 1972. Its locus is the elite Ceylonese Tamil community, who reside in the affluent, fashionable Cinnamon Gardens suburb of Colombo. Juxtaposing two stories of self-discovery, one of Annalukshmi Kandiah, and the other of Balendran Navaratnam, the novel encompasses one year of the characters' lives — beginning with the birthday of the Mudaliyar Navaratnam, Balendran's father, in 1927, and ending at the same in 1928. As a historical period, the 1920s is significant for Sri Lanka as the British colonial rule in the island nation was beginning to wane around that time. Debates surrounding independence, universal franchise, and the future of the island colony were pervading the political scenario as the Donoughmore Commission<sup>2</sup> arrived in Colombo to decide on these issues. Having this historical moment as its backdrop, the novel explores the principal characters' struggle for independence and assertion of identity as they step across lines set by traditions.

The historical context of the novel goes as follows. Headed by Lord Donoughmore, the Donoughmore Commission was constituted by Dr. Drummond Shiels and Frances Butler. The Commission was sent to Sri Lanka to

investigate the shortcomings of the 1924 Manning Constitution of Ceylon and to suggest constitutional reforms. Earlier “the Manning Reforms ... abolished group representation and introduced territorial representation. This gave rise to vociferous protests from Tamils and other minorities ...”<sup>3</sup> The Donoughmore Commission conducted a survey in Ceylon, paying attention to the arguments of various groups and sides. Two significant groups that the Commission met were the Ceylon National Congress, formed in 1919, and the Women’s Franchise Union, formed in 1927. After all the discussions and surveys and talks, the Commission had recommended “universal franchise, making Ceylon the first Asian country to receive it.” (*Cinnamon Gardens* 379)<sup>4</sup> The Commission moreover devised a system of executive committees that would control all government departments. The committees would be formed of people from all ethnic groups. Thus “the system ... was the Commissioner’s recognition of the multi-faceted nature of Ceylonese society. (CG 378). It, most importantly, rejected the principle of communal representation. It is at this politically charged, significantly remarkable backdrop in Sri Lankan colonial history that Shyam Selvadurai situates his second novel *Cinnamon Gardens*. At various levels, involvement of the principal characters with this political ambience and its turbulences – either directly or indirectly – takes place in the novel which, in the words of Selvadurai himself, is “a colonial Novel for a Post-post colonial age.”<sup>5</sup>

The novel revolves around two protagonists– the young school teacher Annalukshmi Kandiah and her middle-aged uncle, Balendran “Bala” Navaratnam. The chapters alternate between the two thus maintaining a very uniform kind of narrative *design* throughout. Vera Alexander rightly points out that “the dual shape of the narrative ... forces readers to continually shift attention from one protagonist to the other.”<sup>6</sup> The two principal characters, apart from tied to each other by familial bonds, also share a similar predicament in terms of their subjugation to life, manifested differently though, and then their eventual assertion of identity at the end of the narrative. The attention of this paper is centred on Balendran Navaratnamas it is through this character that Selvadurai addresses the issue of bisexuality. However, a certain sort of *queerness* can be attributed to the character of Annalukshmi as well. Though undeniably heterosexual, this character shows some *tendencies* not in tune with the traditions of her time which makes her *queer* to a certain extent.

Selvadurai explores the issue of bi/homo-sexuality in *Cinnamon Gardens* through the character of Balendran Navaratnam. Balendran, a forty-year-old man, kept his homosexuality undisclosed. Married to his half-English cousin Sonia with a son studying in London, he lives in a world of his own due to his clandestine homosexuality. While studying in London twenty years earlier, he had fallen in love with an Englishman named Richard Howland. Balendran’s domineering, conservative, and orthodox father discovered the relationship and disrupted it, and subsequently ended it. In deference to the wishes of his father, Balendran got married but was forced to re-appraise himself in the wake of the arrival of the Donoughmore Commission as Richard Howland, his lover from the

past, was visiting Sri Lanka with this Commission. Re-ignition of love between the two estranged lovers took place, and Balendran found himself in a quandary. As the narrative progresses, Balendran breaks his relationship with Richard as he is pulled back to his familial duties, asking him to leave Sri Lanka. However, by the end of the novel, he realises the importance of Richard in his life as the one who truly and completely understood him, and tries for reconciliation by sending him a letter asking him for his friendship. This is the overarching narrative curve of Balendran Navaratnam in *Cinnamon Gardens*.

The intensity of Balendran's feelings for Richard can be seen as his father, the Mudaliyar Navaratnam informed him of the impending arrival of his past lover. Even after twenty years of separation, the name of Richard could bring out a very powerful reaction in him –

Balendran felt light-headed, felt the need to put his head between his legs, to have the blood enter his head again. But, at the same time, he had an equally strong need to maintain his dignity, his calm, in order not to betray in his father's presence the impact that name still had on him after all these years, the combination of regret and dismay that arose in him. (CG 31)

The text provides some meaningful instances on Balendran-Richard relationship in London. Their first meeting, for instance, holds special significance –

... the first time he had seen Richard, [he was] coming across the lawn of Lincoln's Inn, his gown flapping out behind him. It had been a fine autumn day and he, Balendran, had been leaning on the balustrade, too lazy to go into the library and study. He had watched Richard come up the step and Richard, looking up, had seen him too. "Hello," Richard said, as if they had met before.

"Hello," Balendran had replied shyly.

"Care for a tea or coffee?"

Balendran had nodded.

Balendran wondered, even to this day, *how Richard had simply glanced at him and saw his desire*. He, who was so very careful not to be detected watching men. (CG 112 italics mine)

This first encounter of Balendran and Richard is remarkable in that without any sexual sort of exchange between the two, it had a distinct, unmistakable element of *sexualisation*. It was a moment of recognition, *as it were*, between two homosexual men of their 'commonality' and their mutual attraction. There occurred just an exchange of glance between them, two strangers apparently, which was sufficient to take it to a *different dimension*. We get to see that *difference* being presumably materialised in their next meeting –

... Richard [was] standing by the piano, his face flushed with drink and the effort of singing, a lock of his blond hair fallen over his forehead, his hand around Balendran's waist. As the evening progressed and their inhibitions fell away, Richard's hand would invariably slip under Balendran's spine until

Balendran had to lean against the back of the piano so that the other patrons would not notice his arousal. (CG 36)

This *jump* in their relationship signifies as well as highlights Balendran's *affiliation* towards homosexuality. The implied, *abstract* sexualisation of their first meeting received a distinct concretisation in the second. In the novel, Balendran is gay, straight, gay— alternately. Though the heterosexual *manifestations* of his character have never been explored explicitly, the textual implications are enough to comprehend his *dominant* inclination. He and his wife Sonia have a son – Lukshman, a character *in absentia*— thus establishing the *procreative* part of his marital life. But can Balendran be termed bisexual? Sex researchers have always found it difficult to put forward a clear-cut definition of bisexuality. Doubt, apprehension, mystery, and to an extent, distrust, have shrouded this aspect of human sexuality. It has been described as “a form of infantilism or immaturity, a transitional phase, a self-delusion or a state of confusion, a personal or political cop-out ... even a lie”.<sup>7</sup> According to Marjorie Garber, “bisexuality unsettles certainties: straight, gay, lesbian. It has affinities with all of these, and is delimited by none. It is ... an identity that is also not an identity, a sign of the certainty of ambiguity, the stability of instability, a category that defies and defeats categorization.”<sup>8</sup> However, *The Encyclopedia of Lesbian and Gay Histories and Cultures* defines bisexuality as “the capacity to be romantically and/or sexually attracted to individuals of more than one sex.”<sup>9</sup> If we consider this simplistic definition as the definition of bisexuality for a relative convenience, then Balendran would perhaps not fit into the bill of bisexuality proper. The text makes it abundantly clear that Balendran does not feel any romantic or physical attachment with his wife. Rather a distance, a remoteness from her is what is felt by him. (After the birth of the son, however, parental bonding, the common ground of which was the love for their son, brought in an element of intimacy, rather companionship, between the two.) The text makes very straightforward mention of Balendran's sense of alienation from his wife –

How often ... [Balendran tried] to comfort himself for the *anguish* he had felt, the *suffocation*, lying next to his wife, Sonia, at night, unable to sleep. His *suffering* had been intensified by knowing that she despised along with him, felt his *alienation*, almost hated towards her, without knowing its cause. (CG 38-39 italics mine)

*Cinnamon Gardens* significantly does not have any moment of sexual intimacy between Sonia and Balendran. At times, there is a *touchless*, done-out-of-responsibility kind of holding of hands between the husband and the wife which has an element of *asexuality* in them (As opposed to that, the novel has two distinct kissing moments and implied lovemaking scenes of Balendran and Richard.) In fact, Balendran tried to distance himself from Sonia as much as possible by keeping, rather insisting “that they maintain separate bedrooms” (CG 80). A crucial phrase regarding Balendran and Sonia's sexual relationship is “his *formality* even in their lovemaking”(CG 80 italics mine). This phrase highlights the lack of passion and desire which ‘normally’ accompany the act of physical

consummation. When can one be *formal* in lovemaking? An act where there is every possibility to be wild, passionate, and *informal*? It is possible *only* when that passion and desire is missing. This phrase throws very definitive, remarkably meaningful light on Balendran-Sonia sexual relationship. Or rather, on Balendran's *heterosexuality*. Balendran's insistence on having detached bedrooms, his formality in lovemaking, his maintained distance are nothing but attempts to *desexualise* his relationship with his wife as much as possible.

Balendran's clandestine homosexual encounters with Ranjan, "the one he always went with ... a private in the army" (CG p.81) as he takes his occasional nocturnal strolls along the railway tracks further emphasise his sense of suffocation and alienation in his normative married life, and the release (both sexual and emotional, to an extent) that he receives as he *physically* indulges with Ranjan. *Cinnamon Gardens* mentions –

They were a sufficient distance away from the wall now and they scrambled down the rocks to the beach, Ranjan taking Balendran's hand and helping him. Amongst the rocks, they found a fairly private place ... A silence fell between them. After a while, Ranjan put his hand on Balendran's crotch and began to gently massage it. He undid the buttons on Balendran's trousers, and Balendran lifted himself slightly, so Ranjan could slide his trousers down his thighs. Ranjan bent over him and, at the feel of Ranjan's breath on his arousal, Balendran sighed and lay back on the rock. He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them and looked up at the night sky.

Balendran liked to take his time with Ranjan, to prolong *his bliss* as long as possible. (CG 82 italics mine)

Balendran enjoys *bliss* with Ranjan, the key-word in the above citation – an ecstasy which he likes to prolong as much as possible. This textual episode of clandestine sex, explicit in a certain way, though just mentioned once yet implied to have happened several times, situates his stronger homosexual affiliation clearly. Alfred Kinsey<sup>10</sup> devised a seven-point scale which *measures* sexual orientation on a scale of 0 to 6, with people who are considered "more heterosexual" leaning towards the lower end of the scale and people who are considered "more homosexual" leaning towards the higher end. Thus, an unwavering "utterly straight" person would be a "0" on the Kinsey scale whereas a person who has never been anything but homosexual in his/her entire life would end up as a "6". A "perfect" bisexual would be a Kinsey "3", since 3 is the median point between 0 and 6. How far applicable or accurate this scale is, is a different (and further probable) matter altogether, but an endeavour to situate Balendran on this scale would compel one to move towards the higher end of the scale as he seems to be more *into* the homosexual side of his orientation than the heterosexual one. In other words, he is bisexual with homosexuality being more *potent* in him than his heterosexuality. That potency makes him *formal, proper,* and distant in his forced heterosexual lovemaking. He does not *feel* as *wildly* about Sonia as he does about Richard or Ranjan or any other man. One cannot help but wonder whether Balendran would have ever married Sonia or any other

woman for that matter had his father not compelled him to. Is it *enforced bisexuality* we are dealing with in Balendran? Would he have turned out to be a *proper homosexual* had the parental, paternal rather, enforcement not taken place? These are hypothetical queries but it appears that Balendran's heterosexuality perhaps would have never been manifest had his father not intervened in his life and forced him to get married, and thus, so would not have his bisexuality.

A remarkable reference in the text is to Edward Carpenter<sup>11</sup>, the author of *The Intermediate Sex* (1908) which was a foundational text for the LGBT movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Balendran had reportedly read this book and learnt that "inversion had already been studied by scientific men who did not view it as pathological, indeed men who questioned the whole notion that regeneration was the sole object of sex." (CG p.58) Selvadurai even fictionalises a visit of Balendran and Richard to Edward Carpenter and his partner George Merrill in Millthrope. The text says –

When Richard and he had met Carpenter and his companion, George Merrill, Balendran had been amazed and then intrigued by the way they lived, the comradely manner in which they existed, the way they had carved a life out for themselves, despite such strong societal censure. (CG 59)

The trip to Millthrope instilled in Balendran and Richard a belief that for them too, a life of togetherness was possible, that they would also live like this one day. "The visit had given Richard and him such faith in the future of their own love" (CG 59). Until Balendran's final acceptance of himself as he was, he had shown very ambivalent attitude towards homosexuality. In fact, to say that Balendran had been hypocrite about his sexual orientation, will be more accurate. It was for him "... something he had learnt to live with, a daily *impediment* ... a *badly set fracture*" (CG 38 italics mine). The emphasised words exhibit Balendran's negative, discriminatory attitude towards homosexuality. After Sonia and Balendran had met Richard and Alli, Sonia comprehended the kind of friendship these two were in (Alli was Richard's partner). That they were "Friends of Oscar" (CG 111) was discernible to her. Balendran couldn't fathom Sonia's understanding, or rather knowing, of homosexuality as this is "[a] thing... beyond the pale of refined society, beyond the understanding of decent women" (CG 111). Juxtaposing this attitude with his nocturnal occasional carnal bliss with Ranjan situates Balendran as a hypocrite. The question *why* emerges from there onwards. Why was Balendran hypocritical about his homosexuality? The context is of importance here. It is Ceylon of the 1920s we are confronted with—Ceylon where the laws against homosexuality were quite strong and stringent. In fact, the readers are reminded that "it hadn't been that long since the Wilde trial" (CG 141) when Balendran's father appeared unexpectedly in Balendran and Richard's London flat, and threatened to get Richard arrested for sodomy. Also, the fear of societal stigma and humiliation was another addendum. Vera Alexander says, "if homosexuality is banned in England, it certainly was a dark secret worth keeping in Ceylonese society."<sup>12</sup> And in trying to keep his homosexuality a secret, Balendran did take a stand of hypocrisy. He had

submerged his desires underneath a façade of familial, societal propriety apart from occasional forays into anonymous sex.

Balendran's final self-realisation occurred through his estranged elder brother, Arulanandan. Arul was banished to India by the Mudaliyar Navaratnam because of his affair with a low-caste servant woman called Pakkiam twenty-eight years ago. Arul, in his death-bed in India, made his younger brother realise that the norms he had been living by were not followed by anyone but him. "Balendran experiences his brother Arul's death as a moment of enlightenment, of being shocked into an awareness of injustices and double standards in the society and, more precisely, the very family he is a member of."<sup>13</sup> The rules, norms laid out by their extremely authoritarian father were not adhered to by the man himself, and Balendran gets to know of his father's sexual exploitation of Pakkiam's widowed, destitute mother earlier. This awareness made Balendran see his own hypocrisy— "I, too, am a hypocrite." (CG p.279) The discovery of the double standards of his father made Balendran perceive his own duplicity, and he realised the significance of Richard in his life as his one true love as he wholeheartedly accepts his homosexuality.

*Cinnamon Gardens* mentions Balendran's feelings of loneliness, of estrangement, many a time. Emotionally, Balendran is a drained kind of a character. There was always the problem of communication with his wife, and on the other hand, there was no one in his life who would understand him as he was— with his *disposition* (An Austenesque word which has been used quite frequently in the novel.) The most decisive moment for Balendran regarding his sexuality came when he confronted his father "with his true nature, unashamed, assured" (CG p.367). By doing so, Balendran shed the mask he was wearing; he was not a hypocrite any more. The confrontation took place thus –

"Why didn't you leave me in London? I was content then."

"I saved you from that ... degradation. Look at what you have now. What would you have been in London? Nothing."

"Yes, Appa," Balendran said with gathering strength, "but I might have been truly happy." He took a deep breath. "I loved Richard. That would have been enough."

"Stop," the Mudaliyar cried ... "I forbid you to speak such filth in my house. Apologize immediately."

"No, Appa. I cannot, for this is how things are with me. And there isn't a day that goes by that I don't live with the pain of knowing this and not being able to do anything about it." (CG p.367)

This confrontation not only destroyed the *shield* of hypocrisy with which Balendran was masking himself, but also enabled him to assert his identity thus gaining his freedom from the paternal shackles. It enabled him to write a letter to Richard asking for his friendship. Significantly, Balendran did not decide to come out: he decided to stay in the closet as he considered "it would be wrong to hold [his] own desires paramount above those of [his] wife, [his] son. Such an act

would be grossly selfish." (*CG* p.385) However, this final act of Balendran was not borne out of his earlier hypocrisy; rather it was affected by his self-acceptance of himself. He no longer viewed his sexuality as an *impediment*. It *became* a part of him.

Balendran Navaratnam, with his apprehension, exploration, bowing down to societal pressure, duplicity, and eventual self-acceptance, embodies and carries the many different layers in the queer community— the oft-neglected and perhaps misunderstood bisexual community, to be accurate. *Cinnamon Gardens* mostly foregrounds his character as a son and as a lover, and the resultant tussle which ensues is the crux of this conflicted protagonist. A close reading of his unveils the ranges in which his emotional and physical needs wander (also wonder). He is most definitely not a Kinsey 3. Much of his suffocations, sufferings, duplicities, and actions seem to emanate from this precise ‘positioning’. There is a glib, informal, humorous saying in gay culture— “Bi now, gay later.” This saying expresses the *belief* or the *suspicion* in the homosexual community that a self-described bisexual is merely a homosexual in the initial stage of questioning his/her presumed heterosexuality, who will eventually accept that he is homosexual. An alternative, made-up version of this saying can perhaps be loosely applied to Balendran— “Gay now, bi later.” Balendran Navaratnam displays sexual fluidity in being a bisexual man with a stronger affiliation towards homosexuality. Whether he is “gay now, bi later” or “bi now, gay later”, he displays sexual fluidity and that makes him a queer figure.

### Notes :

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/7343-bisexuality-immediately-doubles-your-chances-for-a-date-on-saturday>

<sup>2</sup> In Shyam Selvadurai's own words— “The novel is set against the backdrop of the arrival of the Donough more Commission from England. The purpose of the commission is to grant more power to Sri Lankans and to put in place a constitution through which this power can be exercised. The jockeying for power by the various ethnic, cultural, caste and religious groups reveals immediately the multifaceted, multi-cultural nature of Sri Lankan society. This period also marks the first serious rift between the Sinhalese and the Tamils, the Sinhalese demanding a centralized government, the Tamils and other minorities asking for a more federated system.” Shyam Selvadurai, *Speech to the Canadian Bookseller's Association*, <http://www.interlog.com/~funnyboy/index.htm>, personal website of Shyam Selvadurai

<sup>3</sup> Saynatan Dasgupta, *Shyam Selvadurai: Texts and Contexts*, (New Delhi: Worldview Publications 2005) 82

<sup>4</sup> Shyam Selvadurai, *Cinnamon Gardens*, (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1998). Subsequent references will be cited as *CG* and provided in parentheses immediately after the quote.

<sup>5</sup> Shyam Selvadurai, *Speech to the Canadian Bookseller's Association*, <http://www.interlog.com/~funnyboy/index.htm>, personal website of Shyam Selvadurai

- <sup>6</sup> Vera Alexander, "Investigating the Motif of Crime as Transcultural Border Crossing: *Cinnamon Gardens* and *The Sandglass*", in Christine Matzke and Susanne Muehleisen ed., *Postcolonial Postmortems: Crime Fiction from a Transcultural Perspective*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006) 154
- <sup>7</sup> Steven Angelides, "Introducing Bisexuality", *A History of Bisexuality*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001) 1
- <sup>8</sup> Marjorie Garber, "Extracts from Vice Versa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life(1995)", in Merl Storr ed. *Bisexuality: A Critical Reader*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1999) 137
- <sup>9</sup> From *The Encyclopedia of Lesbian and Gay Histories and Cultures*, Bonnie Zimmerman and George E. Haggerty ed., (New York and London: Garland, 2000)
- <sup>10</sup> Alfred Kinsey (1894-1956) was an American biologist. His research on human sexuality is considered foundational to the modern field of sexology. In his most famous book *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948), Kinsey developed the seven point scale to measure sexual orientation.
- <sup>11</sup> Edward Carpenter (1844-1929) was a poet, socialist philosopher, and early gay activist. At a time when the political ambience of England was hysterical about alternative sexualities generated by the Oscar Wilde trial of 1895, Carpenter started to live together with his partner, George Merrill, in Millthrope. They stayed together from 1898 to 1928, the year Merrill died. E. M. Forster's novel *Maurice* was partially based on the Carpenter-Merrill relationship.
- <sup>12</sup> Alexander, *op. cit.* 156
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 154

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## **REREADING ‘MAHATMA’ IN INDIAN HISTORY THROUGH A READING OF BHIMAYANA : EXPERIENCES OF UNTOUCHABILITY**

**Mushrifa Ibrahim**

### **Abstract**

Graphic novels can be an effective medium that can reflect the emergence and the growth of a developing nation like India and its ability to fuse the past with the present while dealing with socially relevant issues makes it a very pertinent genre in modern times. In this age of hyper reality, where the image has become much more powerful than the words, graphic novels can fit in a whole set of complex ideas in a single page. It offers a relevant space for discussing history, sociology, anthropology, natural sciences and emerging technologies. *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* is perhaps the most well-known of the graphic novels in India due to its inclusion in the Popular Literature paper of the undergraduate course. The objective of this paper would be to read *Bhimayana* as an exponent of “Post-truth.” The ideological debate between Gandhi and Ambedkar becomes very explicit in the differences over the issue of separate electorates for the Depressed classes. Although *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* deals primarily with the issue of caste, in this article an attempt has been made to read into the politics or rather the covert politics at play and examine it through the perspective of Post-truth, an important philosophical and critical pedagogy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Keywords :** graphic novel, Bhimayana, Post truth.

### **Introduction**

Graphic novels are a recent addition to Indian English Writing but it is a genre with immense possibilities. The combination of words and pictures gives it a dual advantage and can be helpful in promoting visual and verbal literacy. The Graphic Novel in India has charted a very relevant and enriching journey. The landscape of the Indian Graphic novel is indeed a varied one, each writer and each novel focusing on a different aspect of Indian life, culture and imagination. Graphic novels can be an effective medium that can reflect the emergence and the growth of a developing nation like India and its ability to fuse the past with the present while dealing with socially relevant issues makes it a very pertinent genre in modern times. This is particularly relevant in this age of hyper reality where the image has become much more powerful than the words. Graphic novels can

fit in a lot of complex ideas in a single page and is particularly relevant in discussing history, sociology, anthropology, natural sciences and emerging technologies.

*Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* (2011) is perhaps the most well known of the graphic novels in India due to its inclusion in the Popular Literature paper of the Undergraduate course. However, the question remains why include this particular graphic novel in a course that caters to a sizeable number of what constitutes the literate youth population? Graphic novels are known to deal with alternate histories, be it in the form of the Holocaust in Art Spiegelman's *Maus* or Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* which deals with the Iran/ Iraq war. *Bhimayana* if we look beyond the biography of B.R Ambedkar, which forms the crux of the graphic novel also deals with one particular aspect of Indian life which is caste system. The grave injustice around caste hierarchy has been a part of Indian history but it has been rendered invisible. Gandhi is hailed as the messiah of the untouchables who lifted them to the respectable position of Harijans-children of God. Very few (apart from the die hard Ambedkarites) knew about the dubious role Mahatma Gandhi played in the issue regarding separate electorates for the Depressed classes. It is therefore essential that the future generations should be made aware of the truths that have been swept under the carpet to present a picture of solidarity within the Indian nation state. If social evils like caste discrimination and untouchability are to be eradicated then these unsettling truths need to be told.

*Bhimayana* is based on the life of B.R. Ambedkar and instead of focussing on the glorious achievements of Ambedkar, who drafted the Indian Constitution, this graphic novel focuses on the issue of caste and untouchability. Inspite of having an enviable repository of degrees and qualification Ambedkar had to face numerous instances of caste discrimination because of his birth in a lower caste. *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* and Navyana, the publishing house that published this graphic novel has a shared history. The publishing house was launched in 2003 and the first publication was *Ambedkar : Autobiographical Notes*, it is a slim volume of 36 pages and less than 10,000 words. Ambedkar wrote down his experiences of casteism in these "notes" and Srividya Natarajan and S. Anand used the same and added some more resources of their own to frame *Bhimayana*. In the afterword to *Bhimayana* which S. Anand calls "A Digna for Bhim", he says: "While touchable Gandhi who succeeded in South Africa came to be recognized as a global anti-imperialism icon, untouchable Bhim who could not drink water in his local school and went on to lead the Mahad Satyagraha in 1927 has been neglected by History" (Anand 103).

An analysis of the various perspectives that have been employed by different writers and research scholars who have written about *Bhimayana* shows that they focus on the graphic novel as a critical approach and as a communicative medium. Pramod K Nayar in the article "Towards a postcolonial critical literacy: *Bhimayana* and the Indian graphic novel" analyses the critical literacy generated among the readers situated in a postcolonial context by the

graphic novel *Bhimayana*. He also talks about the various registers employed in the graphic novel. He uses the term ‘multimodal’ (Nayar 4) in this article and the same perspective has been adopted by Sreyendu Chakraborty in “Unpacking caste politics through the multimodal communicative landscape of *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability*.”

The objective of this paper would be to read *Bhimayana* as an exponent of “Post truth.” The ideological differences between Gandhi and Ambedkar becomes very explicit in the differences over the issue of separate electorates for the “Depressed classes.” Although *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* deals primarily with the issue of caste, this explores the politics or rather the covert politics at play and examine it through the perspective of post truth, an important philosophical and critical pedagogy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The graphic medium makes this task even more enriching as it can include many ideas in a limited space and also express things which might not be palatable or acceptable to Indian society. Nayar is of the opinion that- “in its uncovering of historical wrongs, social inequalities, the silences of the victims and the follies of the age, the graphic narrative-engendered critical alerts us to the need for human rights, the historical abuse of certain groups and the urgent need for reforms”(Nayar 9). This graphic rendering of the life of Bhimrao Ambedkar exposes the dark alleys of history and provides a voice to the hitherto voiceless citizens of the Indian state.

B.R. Ambedkar was never in alignment with Gandhiji’s approach to eradicate untouchability. In the Poona Pact in September 1932 Ambedkar was vocal in his apprehensions and it led to some sort of a difference between Gandhi and Ambedkar. In the Second Round Table Conference in London in 1931, Gandhi opposed Ambedkar’s demand for separate electorates. In 1932 the Communal Award of the British government approved separate electorates for Depressed classes of Indian society. In order to protest against this move, Mahatma Gandhi undertook a fast unto death which was known as the Yerawada fast. In an article “Gandhi, Ambedkar and Separate Electorates Issue”, the writer DN makes an important observation that Gandhi’s fast unto death was not against the British but against Ambedkar and the Dalit movement. Ambedkar had to give in to Gandhi’s demands not because of his allegiance to Gandhi’s ideology but because of the fear that if Gandhi were to die, then the Dalits would have to bear the wrath of the upper class Hindus. Gandhi’s weapon of fast unto death has been interpreted by social scientists in various ways. Gandhi asserted that the conversion of the ignorant i.e., the Depressed class should not include force but “patient toil and suffering” (DN 1329). DN also says that: “This “patient toil and self-suffering” in the struggle against untouchability did not include a fast unto death, a weapon he was willing to wield against Ambedkar and the demand for separate electorates for the untouchables, but not against the upper castes to denabrd an end to untouchability” (DN 1329). This animosity between two reverend leaders of the Indian freedom movement is a synecdoche of the tussle between the various classes in Indian society. However the questions

remains to be asked how much of it is really discussed or finds a place in the history lessons we impart to our future generations? This is significant because the way these lessons are structured would become the irrevocable truth and the subtle nuances of the differences would be forever lost in the official version of the truth.

It would be imperative to have to look at the Textbook in History for Class XII, Themes in Indian History Part III published by NCERT and the Theme Thirteen Mahatma Gandhi and the Nationalist Movement: Civil Disobedience and Beyond, Gandhi is presented as a "people's leader" and someone who possessed powers that were "miraculous and the unbelievable". In Source 5 under the heading "The Problem with Separate Electorates", Gandhi is quoted as having said at the Round Table Conference:

Separate electorates to the "Untouchables" will ensure them bondage in perpetuity... Do you want the "Untouchables" to remain "Untouchables" forever? Well, the separate electorates would perpetuate the stigma. (Themes 360)

Ambedkar's response is also quoted in the next page from his work- *What Congress and Gandhi have done to the untouchables: Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 9):

Here is a class which is undoubtedly not in a position to sustain itself in the struggle for existence. The religion, to which they are tied, instead providing them an honourable place, brands them as lepers, not fit for ordinary intercourse. Economically, it is a class entirely dependent upon the high-caste Hindus for earning its daily bread with no independent way of living open to it.(qtd. in Themes 361)

Ambedkar insisted that Hindu society should be organised on the basis of "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity" and the ideological sanction of the Shastras should be overthrown. In the same text in theme 15 "Framing the Constitution: The Beginning of a new Era" Sardar Patel is quoted in Source 3 as "The British element is gone, but they have left the mischief behind" and in Source 4 "I believe separate electorates will be suicidal to the minorities" both taken from *Constituent Assembly Debates* Vol. V and Vol. II respectively as arguments against separate electorates. In these arguments and counter arguments, a consensus seems to have been generated against separate electorates and a perception was generated that the idea of separate electorates is inimical to Indian society, the scales tipping in favour of Gandhi. The conventional/ established version of history has been identified as follows:

Conventional (Hindu, upper caste) wisdom has it that Gandhi overcame the British imperial policy of 'divide and rule' by the Yeravada fast. The fast... is part of the legend of the 'national movement'. This conventional wisdom also has it that Ambedkar was a willing tool of the British in implementing their 'divide and rule' policy. (D.N 1329)

However, a look at the ground reality reveals a different picture altogether. Ambedkar's first political party the Independent Labour Party won 11 out of 15 seats in the 1937 elections when seats were reserved for SC's in Bombay Province. However, this win gave his party very little say in passing legislation. In 1952 Dr Ambedkar was defeated in the general elections and this proves that the Dalit movement was at a loss because of the rejection of the separate electorate issue. Apart from this the daily challenges faced by people from the Depressed classes is never known by the rest of the country and the fact that atrocities on the Dalits have not lessened can be proved by the Hathras Gangrape case. Thus, there are fissures in the picture of solidarity presented by the metanarrative of the Indian Democratic nation. In such a scenario the philosophy of Post truth can be a useful tool to delve into the dark alleys of Indian history

The term "Post truth" was used for the first time by Serbian American playwright Steve Tesich in an article "A Government of Lies" published in *The Guardian* in 1992. In 2004 Ralph Keyes wrote the book *The Post Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life* and in 2016 the word "Post truth" was selected by the Oxford Dictionaries as the "Word of the Year" and it was defined as "a term relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Brahms 3). Yuval Noah Harari in *21 Lessons for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* observes that the phenomenon of post truth is specific to human beings and is linked to the ability to create stories and ideologies and believe in them. There is always more preference for power rather than truth and a tendency to rule the world rather than to understand it. Technology facilitates the building of a certain propaganda which affirms individual prejudices. Citing the techniques employed by hackers and trolls Harari says that they employ stories to reaffirm prejudices of those who believe in such prejudices. It can be used to create rifts in society and also to dismantle the democratic system. In *Post Truth*, Lee McIntyre says that "...innovation in the post-truth phenomenon is not a denial of the existence of truth and facts, but rather is the subjugation of facts to personal preconceptions and a subjective perspective" (qtd in Brahms 4).

In an interview with the British journalist Carole Cadwallader, Daniel Dennett an American philosopher remarks that human beings are in a period of "epistemological murk" and there is no respect for truth and facts and no desire to understand the world factually. *Bhimayana* can be seen as an endeavour to present the factual details of the Gandhi Ambedkar feud in an objective manner, without allowing emotions to cloud our rationality and to discover the post truth behind the so called truth of Indian history. Instead of reading through pages and pages of history it would be much more effective to look at the panels in page 90 and 91 of the graphic novel, *Bhimayana*. In the space of two pages/ panels many important documentary evidences are provided in a succinct manner that tells the whole truth, often glossed over. In page no 90 we have the recommendations to the Minorities Committee of the Indian Round Table Conference, showing the terms under which the Depressed classes would agree to be under a majority rule.

It is dated September 1931 and talks about equal citizenship, equal rights, non discrimination, representation in legislature, services, cabinet and no prejudicial action against them. This is upheld by Ambedkar and we see the figure of Ambedkar extending a hand and holding these recommendations. At the same time using the bird speech bubble which signifies benevolence he says that "I have not the slightest doubt that if the Untouchables of India were given the chance of electing their representatives to this Conference, I would find a place here. I say therefore that **I fully represent the claims of my community.** Let no man be under any mistaken impression as regards that" (Anand 90).

Ambedkar believed in the democratic process of electing a representative from among the Dalits although he had a valid reason to represent them as he was one of them. In the opposite panel in panel 91 Gandhi's thoughts is shown in the scorpion speech bubble which stand for acrimony: "I claim myself in my own person to represent the vast mass of Untouchables. I claim that I would get, if there was a referendum of the untouchables their vote, and that **I would top the poll!**" (Anand 91)

Gandhi expressed his confidence that he would be the favourite representative of the untouchables but at the same time his hands are shown to be holding the letter written to Sir Samuel Hoare, Secretary of State for India dated March 1932. In this letter Gandhi deliberately represents the Untouchables as "not very well organised" and are without "political consciousness". This seems to suggest as though Gandhi now replaces the White man's burden with the Upper caste brown man's burden. He categorically states that separate electorates would harm Hinduism. He announces his intention of a fast unto death if a separate electorate is created. In the adjoining panel Gandhi is shown fasting, lying down with an axe in his hand. The axe is symbolically the tool of fast unto death with which he threatened Ambedkar as well as the British. D.N in "Gandhi, Ambedkar and Separate Electorates Issue" observes that Gandhi's bias towards the upper caste is betrayed time and again. In the Vykom Satyagraha he urged the leaders not to 'overawe the orthodox'. During the Yerawada fast he asked Kellapan to call off his fast demanding entry into Guruvayur temple citing the reason that not enough notice was given. K Kellapan was a social activist from Kerela who fought against untouchability. Yet Gandhi did not use his very powerful weapon of fast unto death against the eradication of untouchability but only for prevention of separate electorates.

The entire episode of the demand for separate electorates has been presented with the factual details and also provokes the reader to think beyond the conventional versions of history. Moreover, there are no distracting details, prejudices or elevated descriptions of the either leaders. Without sparking any controversy by including any inciting remarks or comments, the whole episode has been shown, leaving enough space for the imagination and interpretation by the readers. This is perhaps the strength of the graphic novel, since pictures/illustrations can also be used many facts that might be unpalatable but nevertheless needs to be addressed can be shown symbolically without using

words. For instance, the axe wielding figure of Mahatma Gandhi. However, the readers should have sufficient visual-verbal literacy to read beyond the lines.

On page 90 on the left hand corner of the panel, we have a discussion between two characters who appeared in the beginning of the graphic novel. The character who speaks benevolently tells how Gandhi's fast forced Ambedkar and the British government to give up on the issue of separate electorates. The other character understood that separate electorates meant reservation and it was just as well that Gandhi undertook the fast unto death. However, it might be asked whether such an attitude adopted by the second unnamed character would help resolve the situation of the Untouchables. We know for a fact that the majority of the Depressed classes in spite of the limited opportunities given to them in terms of reservation is still in a very deplorable state.

Another important issue that is addressed in these pages is the drafting of the Constitution. The first character says that if Ambedkar had drafted free India's Constitution it would have been a different one. The conventional knowledge is shown in the speech bubble of the second character who said that they were taught in school that Ambedkar was the architect of the Constitution and the ignorance of the character regarding the position held by Ambedkar as the Chair of the Drafting Committee which drafted the Constitution adopted by the Constituent Assembly in 1949 shows how important was Ambedkar's contribution regarded by the general Indian citizens. Adjoining to this panel we have the Draft Constitution of November 1949 based on Ideas of Justice, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. In page 91 certain articles of the Draft Constitution are outlined but many of them were not accepted or implemented. For instance in article number 3 it is stated that "nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making any special provision for women and children" (Anand 91). The speech bubble that has been strategically placed in context at the right corner of page 91 depicts Ambedkar's attempt as the First Law Minister of India to make amendments in the Hindu Code Bill- such sanctioning divorce and grant property rights to widows and girl child- but his proposal was rejected and Ambedkar had to resign from Nehru's Cabinet. Thus, this incident and the present condition of the Depressed Classes belie the truth behind the meta narratives of history.

After an analysis of the political implications of the various events associated with Indian history it becomes clear that it does not serve to accept whatever is handed down to us as history/truth. One needs to question further, to delve deeper and *Bhimayana* has been successful in etching the Post truth behind the so called truth of an important episode of Indian history. In order to understand the connections between the alternate truth revealed in *Bhimayana* and the philosophy of Post truth we have to look into the definition of Post truth according to Oxford Dictionary "... a term relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective truths are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Brahms 1). If one considers the term "objective truth" we have to take into consideration the letter written by Gandhi

to Sir Samuel Hoare which is not common knowledge. Rather the public opinion was moulded by epithets like "Mahatma" or the great one and Father of the Nation. Even national schemes related to the welfare of public life is still spearheaded by icons specifically related to Gandhi. The name Gandhi had such a lasting on the psyche of the Indians that it enabled the Indian National Congress to rule over the country for 60 years. Such is the power of emotions which undermine the facts and sway public opinion. Brahms in "Philosophy of Post-Truth" proposes a different definition of Post truth : a term denoting circumstances in which our ability to clarify the reality in order to understand it and in order to function within it on the basis of facts is weakening as a result of high intensity interference by four peak waves: the information explosion and disruptive technology: dwindling of faith in institutions and in 'truth tellers': undermining postmodernist ideas: and bitter political battles"(Brahms 17-18).

If we consider the four peaks outlined in the definition of post truth information explosion has proved to be a boon rather than a bane in the context of the graphic novel as it can take the truth/ post truth to a larger number of people but this does not necessarily involve spreading a fake message. It is due to the lack of faith in conventional types of narrative like official history that graphic novels have evolved, postmodern ideas instead of undermining leaves the field open to a larger number of interpretations and shatters the hegemony of a master narrative and bitter political battles has been a part and parcel of the graphic novel from its inception and also in its concerns. Hence, graphic novels like *Bhimayana : Experiences of Untouchability* can be a powerful medium to espouse the philosophy of post truth. Pramod K. Nayar in his article 'Towards a postcolonial critical literacy: *Bhimayana* and the Indian graphic novel' published in *Studies in South Asian Film and Media*, March 2012 states that:

It is *Bhimayana*'s adoption of popular-populist regimes of the verbal-visual (or image-text) that constitutes a radicalization of form, even as it contributes to a critical literacy about casteism, atrocity and human rights. Critical literacy forces the reader, through the use of narratives and autobiographies, to link personal experiences with socio-historical and institutional power relations. (Nayar 4)

*Bhimayana* thus foregrounds the issue of casteism and its deployment of a traditional art form gives greater visibility to a lesser known form as well as lesser known social evil especially if we place it in the context of a worldwide readership. Such stories need to be told and heard if we want to give justice to the less fortunate ones and it has to be told in a form that would bring it closer to more number of people). The inclusion of this text in the undergraduate syllabus is a welcome move and the response of the students is very found to be encouraging. This is a testimony to the success and potential of the form which would become a key player in developing greater awareness regarding marginalised but contentious issues.

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## **THE COLONIAL/ POSTCOLONIAL GAZE : A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF MALEK ALLOULA'S *THE COLONIAL HAREM***

**Nazrana Haque**

### **Abstract**

Malek Alloula's book *Le Colonial Harem* (1981) translated as *The Colonial Harem* (1986) is a postcolonial narrative that studies colonial French photographs of Algerian women in postcards. During the colonisation of Algeria from 1830 to 1962, the Algerian women were made to pose for photographs, either clothed or semi-naked. For Alloula, this exercise of the French male colonial fantasy was a violation of the Algerian women's body and space. In *Orientalism*, Said talks about the way the colonisers generated a body of knowledge about the colonised, that represented them as inferior. The French photographs of the Algerian women in different settings, costumes and poses are also a part of the oriental discourse, which portrayed them as highly sexualised and uncivilised. Alloula exposes the hypocrisy of the French male colonisers, as more than a creation of a pseudo-knowledge about Algeria, it was a means of satisfying the colonial male sexual fantasy. However, Alloula does not foreground the perspective of the Algerian women and there are gaps in his narrative, leading to a double-objectification of women. My paper shall analyse the limitations of the visual representation of the photographs in Alloula's narrative, which makes the Algerian women victims of the colonial as well as postcolonial gaze. I shall further analyse the appropriation of the tropes of the veil and the harem in the French photographs and study the subversive aspect of the trope of the veil in the Algerian freedom struggle. Alloula's text does not provide an alternative discourse to the depiction of the Algerian women and neither does it allow the women to reclaim their narrative. Thus, this paper shall also study some of the alternative feminist visual and literary narratives, by Algerian artists and writers, as they explore the Algerian women's experience of the French colonisation of Algeria.

**Keywords :** French colonisation, veil, harem, postcolonial narratives, visual culture.

*Le Colonial Harem* (1981) by Malek Alloula, originally published in French and translated by Myrna Godzich and Wlad Godzich as *The Colonial Harem* (1986), is a collection of essays that analyse the photographs of Algerian women in French postcards during the French colonisation of Algeria (1830-1962). These photographs are dated from 1900 to 1930, and Alloula reads these photographs

as an exercise of French men's sexual fantasy of colonised Algerian women. As the French colonisers unveiled the Algerian landscape, Alloula sees these photographs as a testimony of the unveiling of the Algerian women. My paper shall study *The Colonial Harem* by Alloula, in order to problematize the French male colonial gaze and possession of the body of the colonised Algerian women in the photographs. Furthermore, Alloula's project of revisiting these French photographs of the Algerian women as a postcolonial visual narrative, represents the Algerian women as mute victims. I shall draw upon visual cultural theory in order to undertake a gendered analysis of the way Algerian women are represented in the colonial photographs, and in Alloula's postcolonial narrative. I shall interrogate the way Alloula's narrative disempowers the colonised Algerian women, and explore alternative visual and literary postcolonial feminist narratives where women reclaim their agency over their body as well as their voice in the postcolonial archive.

Said's Orientalism, talks about the Orient as an European invention, "a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences"(1) and was manifested in the corpus of Oriental knowledge that the colonizers generated. This Oriental knowledge has been in circulation even today, and there is a proliferation of stereotypes against the people of the erstwhile colonies. Alloula in *The Colonial Harem*, criticises this Oriental knowledge that the French colonists created through the photographic representation of Algerian women- either with clothes or stripped from the upper body, as a reinforcement of the colonial stereotype of the uncontrollable sexuality of the East. He exposes the pornographic intent of the photographs, concealed under the pretext of the French male colonisers' curiosity to gain knowledge about Algerian population and its culture. Barbara Harlow in the introduction to *The Colonial Harem* says , "The postcards . . . no longer represent Algeria and the Algerian woman but rather the Frenchman's phantasm of the Oriental female and her inaccessibility behind the veil in the forbidden harem" (xiv). Alloula mentions the dual purpose of his book, "first, to uncover the nature and the meaning of the colonialist gaze; then, to subvert the stereotype that is so tenaciously attached to the bodies of women" (5). However, he seems to be partially successful, as even though he does critique the "humiliation" of the Algerian women at the hands of the French colonizers, he does not necessarily subvert the stereotypes attached to the women's body. Alloula's intent of circulating these old photographs in the postcolonial times, does not undo the oppression of these women.

My essay is divided into 4 sections- the first section, "Visual Representation of Women", analyses the gendered representation of women, especially in the context of photographs; the second and third sections, "The Harem", and "The Veil", deals with two important tropes associated with Algerian women and the way it has been appropriated by the French colonisers in the photographs and; the final section, "Feminist Criticism and Alternative History", deals with the feminist criticism of the French male coloniser's gaze as well Alloula's revisitaton

of the photographs, and explores alternative feminist postcolonial visual and literary narratives that give voice to the colonised Algerian women.

### **Visual Representation of Women**

Photography as an art is based on power relations and as Frosh points out, "certain people are made visible to others through the agency of a third party: photographers. This mediating function does not, however, guarantee symmetrical power relations between photographer, viewer and viewed ... varying degrees of control over the production, distribution and iconography of the images ... gives photographers themselves a degree of power over those they photograph (44). In this context, the French male photographer, already at a privileged position of being male coloniser, now wields greater power over the Algerian women he photographs. The French photographer has a voyeuristic and active presence, as he directs the setting and pose of the women in the photographs. The pictures of the veiled women and the pictures of the harem taken from outside reveal the voyeuristic gaze of the photographer (See fig.1 and fig. 2(a) and (b)), while the representations of the semi-naked women show the photographer as the director of the photographs (See fig. 3 and fig. 4). The veil and the harem (which I shall explore further in the next sections) are hindrances to the photographer, and he has to unveil and penetrate the inaccessible feminine space of the harem in order to capture these women in his camera.



**Fig 1. Scenes and types.** Moorish women taking a walk\*

\*The captions of the photographs are taken from Alloula's *The Colonial Harem*.

**Fig. 2 (a)** Moorish women at home**Fig. 2 (b)** Scenes and types. Moorish woman

**Source:** Trans. Godzvich, Myrna and Wlad Godzvich. *The Colonial Harem by Malek Alloula*. 1986.

Frosh says that photography blurs the distinction between the private and public space, "its spectacular power is central to the structuring and negotiation of the public and the private as experiential categories in a society where publicness and visibility are closely interwoven" (45). The harem, and the veil, which Alloula sees as "mobile extensions of an imaginary harem" (13) prohibits the photographer's gaze. Meyda Yegenoglu argues :

The desire to penetrate the mysteries of the Orient and thereby uncover hidden secrets (usually expressed in the desire to lift the veil and enter into the forbidden space of the harem) is one of the constitutive tropes of Orientalist discourse. An obsession with a "hidden" and "concealed" Oriental life and with the woman behind the veil and in the harem has led to an overrepresentation of Oriental women in an effort to evade the lack posed by a closed "inner" space ("European Ladies in the Harem" 73).

Alloula mentions that by making Algerian women pose for him in the photographs, he takes revenge for denying him "any access and [questioning] the legitimacy of his desire" (14). The photographer creates his own harem in the photographs by creating the setting of an Algerian harem, in terms of props within his own studio and hires Algerian women to pose for him scantily clad or semi-naked. Visual culture is gendered and as Mulvey mentions, "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure ... women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness" (19). Thus, the French photographs are not just representations of the orient by the colonisers, that is circulated as pseudo-

knowledge about the colonised, rather a fulfillment of the French male colonisers' sexual objectification of colonised Algerian women. These photographs represent Algerian women decked up with traditional jewellery and dresses but are made to reveal their breasts (See fig. 3 and fig. 4).

Alloula finds the photographs overtly sexual, almost pornographic, but it is concealed in the way that the photographers try to make the background realistic and the captions that it carries along with it. There is no reference to the women's bodies whatsoever, and seem like the depiction of facts about the Algerian culture. These photographs were a part of the French postcards, an official document, which is easily available and circulated mostly for private conversations, the photographs play an ambiguous role in becoming a source of information as well as a means of personal sexual entertainment. Coombes and Edwards in the book review of Alloula's work are critical the medium of photography itself, "It is symptomatic of the seductive quality of the photograph, of its status as simultaneously *public* witness and '*aide memoire*' for the intensely *private* experience of recalling the phantasm of the colonial *imaginaire* that these books, more often than not, reinstate such mythologies as much as they disrupt them" (510). Thus, even though Alloula used the photographs to expose the French colonial violation of Algerian women, the "sexual appeal" of the photographs seem to betray his purpose.



**Fig. 3 :** Young Moorish woman



**Fig. 4 :** Southern Algeria. Dance

**Source :** Trans. Godzvich, Myrna and Wlad Godzvich. *The Colonial Harem* by Malek Alloula. 1986.

### ***The Harem***

Alloula mentions that the harem is the site of French colonial curiosity, as it has figured as an important trope in the travel accounts of the Turkish, Levant and Moghul empires (95). Harems are female spaces, usually part of Islamic

culture, where wives, concubines, mothers, unmarried sisters, and even children of the man of the house would live together. The space of the harem was a private space, that protects women from the male gaze. The harems were a site of excessive sexuality and as Sarah Rogers, mentions, “For the West, the harem became a spatial embodiment of the various politically charged oppositions underpinning the colonial enterprise: male/ female, visibility/ invisibility, East/ West, and tradition/ modernity” (38). If we read the harem in the context of the Foucauldian nexus of power and knowledge, which employs Bentham’s idea of “Panopticon” (146), the power relation between the coloniser and the colonised seems to be reversed. In Alloula’s book, the French male colonists who have power over the colonised Algerian women, are unable to gain access to the harem, and the surveillance of the space is impossible (See fig. 2(a) and (b)). These are photographs that are taken from outside the harem, and Alloula remarks, the way the Algerian feminine world “threatens him in his being and prevents him from accomplishing himself as the gazing gaze” (14). The harem and the women within it had to be appropriated by the French photographer to exhibit his power over the inferior Algerian population.

Best talks about the way the harem titillated the French male coloniser’s sexual curiosity, “To see an enclosed society of women embodying both eroticism and *paudeur* (modesty). Their sexual services reserved for one man, must have seemed the fulfillment of a maculine ideal” (876). Since the French male coloniser could not access the harem from within, he shows the harems as prison, and the bars on the picture reveal this (See fig. 2 (a) and (b)). The sexuality of the semi-naked woman is inviting yet she is not directly accessible from outside (See fig. 2(b)). So, the photographer creates the setting of the harem, and “all the women called out one by one, who can only comply with the call (that is what they are paid for), are required by the photographer to dress and adorn themselves . . . they are made-up, covered with gold, to be infinitely beautiful and desirable, dreamy and distant, submissive and regal” (Alloula 49). It retains some cultural aspects such as jewellery, outfits and dresses which suggest the existence of a “feigned realism” (Alloula 19).

He hires as models, a few Algerian women, who as Alloula mentions “impersonate, to the point of believability, the unapproachable referent: the *other* Algerian woman, absent in the photo” (17). The photographs are thus a double appropriation of the Algerian women’s space and body. In the absence of a counter-discourse that could challenge the colonial depiction of the Algerian women and their society, these photographs on postcards served as information, where the purpose of women in the harem was seen as only sexual. “The emphasis on the mistreatment of Muslim women by Muslim men lent the colonial project an air of nobility; rather than a garb for power and resources, the colonial enterprise could be recast as a progressive project that will advance the societies they invade and occupy and ultimately improve the standing of women” (Ali 34). Alloula in his postcolonial narrative does claim that the photographs generated pseudo-knowledge about the way Algerian harems functioned, the

various relationships, activities etc, but does not offer an alternative discourse that challenges these representations

### The Veil

The veil is another important trope of Algerian femininity and a barrier preventing the gaze of the French male coloniser. Yegenoglu talks about the politics of the veil, “the veiled woman is not simply an obstacle in the field of visibility and control...the loss of control does not imply a mere loss of sight, but a complete reversal of positions: her body completely invisible to the European observer except for her eyes, the veiled woman can see without being seen” (*Colonial Fantasies* 40). Alloula also mentions this, “the photographer feels photographed; having himself become an object-to-be-seen, he loses initiative: he is dispossessed of his own gaze”(14) (See fig.1). There is a desire for the colonisers to reveal the “phantasm” behind the veil, not just for the fulfillment of their sexual fantasy but to reinforce their domination over the colonised. Frantz Fanon talks about the way women were taken as the “theme of action”. “Unveiling this woman is revealing her beauty; it is baring her secret, breaking her resistance, making her available for adventure. Hiding the face is also disguising a secret . . . There is in it the will to bring this woman within his reach, to make her a possible object of possession” (44). Alloula critiques this objectification of the Algerian women and the appropriation of the veil by the colonisers. The photographer makes the veiled women, who were initially unavailable for him, pose for his camera with the veil (See fig. 5). The photographs that Alloula catalogues shows the gradual unveiling of the Algerian women by the French photographer. In fig. 6, the woman is not “unveiled”; rather the veil is drawn aside to reveal the face as well as some part of her body.



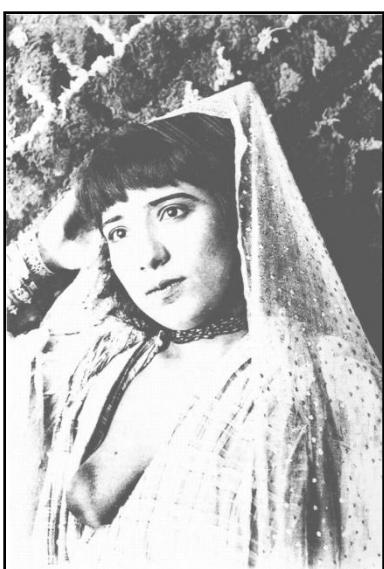
**Fig 5 :** Algeria. Moorish woman in city attire



**Fig. 6 :** Kabyl woman covering herself with the haik.



**Fig. 7(a):** Beduin woman.



**Fig. 7(b):** Scenes and types.  
Young woman.

Alloula says that the photographs became an anthology of different variants of bosoms, “the viewer gets to know a large variety of bosoms: first the Beduin, then the Kabyl, then the

‘Uled-Nayl, and so on” (105) (See fig.7(a) and (b)). This was the kind of oriental knowledge that was circulating within the French colonial discourse. It reduced the Algerian women to their bodies, as their bosoms became their identity. Within the space of the French photographer’s imaginary harem, the French coloniser is free to fulfill his sexual fantasies, thus exploring sapphism or lesbianism too (See fig. 8) .Such explicit photographs essentialized the stereotypes of the East’s immoral and uncontrollable sexuality, while veiling the coloniser’s own sexual desires.



**Fig. 8:** Scenes and types. Reclining Moorish women.

**Source :** Trans. Godzvich, Myrna and Wlad Godzvich. *The Colonial Harem* by Malek Alloula. 1986.

### Feminist Criticism and Alternative Discourse

The French colonisers seem to take pride in unveiling the mysterious and hidden body of the Algerian women, and the oriental knowledge that they generated. However, Alloula in countering the colonialist gaze in his book, seems to have done a similar exercise of exposing the Algerian women and her body to a wide reading public, without allowing the women to reclaim their narrative or space. The Algerian women seem to have now become the victim of a double gaze- the male coloniser and the male postcolonial subject. Lazreg says, "Alloula dug up the colonial pictorial archives and 'violated' Algerian women once more by making titillating pictures available to a wider audience than the original. His narration cannot transcend the contemporary thirst for the eroticization of any woman's body" (190).

Alloula focalises on the way the Algerian women are depicted in the photographs, but does not go beyond what is represented. Shloss says, "The deepest source of his [ Alloula] anger seems not to derive from concern for the women who are the subjects of these photographs, but from "the absence of ... male society... its defeat, its irremediable rout". The women are mute objects in the French photographs as well as in Alloula's book. Alloula presumes that the French violated these Algerian women by making them pose, but this presumption is problematic, given Alloula does not provide a background of these women and Algerian women in general. He mentions that the semi-naked women were lower class Algerian women (17), who were made to pose in exchange for money. However, there were many other pictures that showed veiled women as well as fully clothed women, who might not have been lower-

class women. Moreover, the dominant discourse might see this exercise as a violation of women's body, equated to a rape, but posing veiled, unveiled or semi-naked alone or with another women, might have been an outlet of self-expression for some women. Nawal El Saadawi, says in the context of Arab women, "Segregation and the veil were not meant to ensure the protection of women, but essentially that of men. And the Arab woman was not imprisoned in the home to safeguard her body, her honour and her morals, but rather to keep intact the honour and morals of men" (206). Thus, in this context, since we do not hear the voices of these women at all, Alloula's contention that these photographs were a violation of the Algerian women can be questioned. The veil and the harem, both patriarchal constructs, might have been barriers and some women might have had to conceal their lesbian relations too. The French photographs provided them probably provided them with a sense of freedom and sexual expression. However, these women and their lives are not focalised by Alloula and there is a gap in his narrative.

The agency of the colonised Algerian women seems to have been jeopardised in Alloula's act of "writing back to the empire". "Evoked as the embodiment of the Algerian nation, the Algerian woman signified the sacred, domestic space which was to be protected and reclaimed from French colonial imposition. The intimate pact between modernization and colonialism has often been viewed through the prism of vision and power" (Rogers 38). There seems to be an appropriation of the Algerian women's violated body, within the discourse of the decolonising mission. Alloula remarks, "I must have been the object of the colonial gaze" and calls his act of writing the book, an act of exorcism (Introduction xiii). There is an appropriation of the colonised Algerian women's experience by Alloula, and there is no space for them to assert their own voice and challenge the oppression. The Algerian women's violation is seen by Alloula as the violation of the Algerian nation, and his act of writing in an exorcism that he should undertake. This idea is not very different from the colonial rhetoric that feminises the colonised nation and sees the coloniser as a masculine power. As Yegenoglu mentions, "In the struggle over capturing or preserving the essence of the Algerian culture, women came to



**Fig 9: Scene from Battle of Algiers (1966)**

**Source :** <https://www.theartblog.org/2010/07/black-and-white-and-relevant-battle-of-algiers/>

symbolize, both for the French and for the Algerians, the embodiment of this essence. Hence the struggle over this authentic essence was fought over women's bodies; it was onto her veiled body that both French colonialism and Algerian patriarchy projected their fears, desires, and policies" (137).

Fig. 9 depicts a scene from the Gillo Pontecorvo's movie *Battle of Algiers*, where a veiled woman conceals arms. The trope of the veil might have been a patriarchal trope, yet Algerian women used it to subvert colonial power, when they concealed arms and ammunition to fight the colonisers. Barbara Harlow also mentions this in the introduction to the book. This portrayal is very different from what Alloula portrays through the French photographs. The veil had dynamic connotations from colonisation to the decolonising movements. As Fanon mentions :

The veil was worn because tradition demanded a rigid separation of the sexes, but also because the occupier was bent on unveiling Algeria. In a second phase, the mutation occurred in connection with the Revolution.... The veil was abandoned in the course of revolutionary action. What had been used to block the psychological or political offensives of the occupier became a means, an instrument. The veil helped the Algerian woman to meet the new problems created by the struggle (63).

Alloula provides a very narrow understanding of the veil and does not see the active role that women played in the freedom struggle and not merely passive victims to oppression. There is a need to generate an alternative narrative history for the Algerian women, one that not simply exposes the victimisation by the French colonisers but also asserts the women's agency over their own body and identity. Algerian women were active in the struggle against French colonisation, a large number of women joined the National Liberation Front, an armed guerrilla band, yet this history has been erased.

Houria Niati, an Algerian woman painter, problematized the French painter Delacroix's painting of "Women of Algiers in Their Apartment" (1834) and recreated his painting after a century and named it "No to Torture" (1982) (See fig. 10( a) and (b)). Niati reworked Delacroix's painting in an abstract form, where the sensual poses of the women remain, but the faces are crossed or prison bars are painted, suggesting the torture that the Algerian women were subjected to during the French-Algerian war. "Removing the figures' clothing and jewellery, Niati builds up the figural bodies with thickly applied paint, and indicates a sense of corporeality through roughly defined color transitions" (Rogers 38). Harlow also discusses alternative feminist narratives and mentions contemporary women writers such as Fatima Mernissi's Fadela M'rabet, and Assia Djebar. The works of these writers, Harlow states "addressed not only to the former occupiers Algeria but also to those responsible for the present condition of the Algerian woman, often referred to as the second of 'two colonialisms'" (xxii). The perspective of Algerian women during the Battle of Algiers, has been focalised in Assia Djebar's novel, *L'amour, la fantasia* (1985), translated as *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*. Djebar, an Algerian woman

author, weaves together her own experiences of growing up in colonial Algeria with the oral accounts of Algerian women who participated in the Algerian freedom struggle from 1954 to 1962. Djamila Débèche, another Algerian woman author, was known for her writings on Algerian women. Her novel, *Aziza* (1955), created furore and was branded as an anti-nationalist text as it was considered to be supportive of French colonialism. Débèche's novel explored the conflicts of tradition and modernity in Algeria through the female protagonist's perspective, and critiqued the institution of marriage as oppressive for women (Yousef 160). Thus, Algerian women writers, as well as artists have drawn out alternative histories of Algerian women in their works, that depict women's condition in both colonial and postcolonial Algeria, and need to be included within the canon of Algerian postcolonial writings.



**Fig. 10(a):** Eugène Delacroix, *Women of Algiers in their Apartment* (1834)



**Fig. 10(b):** Houria Niati, *No To Torture* (1982)

**Source :** Sarah Rogers, "Houria Niati's "No To Torture": A Modernist Reconfiguration of Delacroix's "Women of Algiers in their Apartment""". 2002.

The representation of Algerian women in Malek Alloula's book, might be seen as a decolonising project, as it is able to expose the French male colonisers' dehumanising sexual fantasy, validated by the colonial civilising mission. Yet, it fails to provide a counter-history to the French colonisation through Algerian women's perspective. We are not led into the social background or the psyche of the women, and their experiences of posing for these photographs are not foregrounded. Imagining the Algerian women's body as the body of the Algerian nation, again objectifies women, ignoring their victimisation, desires and the active role that they played in the French-Algerian war. Hence, alternative postcolonial feminist archive needs to be generated that not only challenges the coloniser's narrative but also establishes the colonised women as active agents of their body, identity and representation.

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## **REPRESENTATION AND NUANCES : INTERROGATING REPRESENTATION OF THE TRIBAL IN MAMANG DAI'S *THE LEGENDS OF PENSAM* AND GOPINATH MOHANTY'S *PARAJA***

**Lakshminath Rabha**

### **Abstract**

In the recent times Representation is viewed as a nuanced expression owing to manifold possibilities of interpretations of the represented body under the postcolonial deliberation. The process of representation, when examined under postcolonial lens, is found entangled with the colonial design of self/other dichotomy for it leads to some fundamental theoretical questions of who is representing whom and what are the ulterior political motives involved. A dismal picture comes to the front when this unsettled theoretical perplexity is stretched further to the praxis of representation of the tribal in Indian context for it is seemingly through the use of false representation that the tribal has been reduced to marginality and subjected to perpetual exploitation. Representation of the Tribal since the colonial period in a caste ridden Indian society is found to be burdened with many apparent prejudices as the colonial anthropological texts do not qualify the present-day expectations of authentic representation resulting in certain levels of discontentment. It is however quite pertinent to observe the representation of the tribal in fictional narratives as it ostensibly adds a different dimension to the entire discourse of tribal representation for fiction does not necessarily require to hold on to certain limitations or boundaries when placed against the representations made by the Colonial Ethnography. Nevertheless it is to be noted that if the representation of the tribal in fiction is not carried out with considerable degree of care and sensibility, the authorial liberty and flexibility of fiction may culminate in having a boomerang effect. In the premise of the above proposition, an attempt is made in this paper to uncover the politics of representation relying on two select novels- *The Legends of Pensam* by Mamang Dai and *Paraja* by Gopinath Mohanty.

**Keywords :** Representation, Colonial Anthropology, Fictional Narrative.

This paper attempts to make an exploration of the nuances of representation of Indian tribal in fiction and elsewhere with the forethought that tribal representation is skewed with certain political undercurrent leading to the construction and continuation of many dehumanizing stereotypes on tribal

identity. The term representation, though seemingly quite simplistic and unproblematic in nature, is essentially tinted with innumerable grey areas that call for further research into the represented body by way of critical assessment of the flipside of the process of representation for the representation may take place at different levels, situations and conditions. In a simpler term, representation may be understood as an act of describing or depicting something or to symbolize and stand for something as a substitute with a broader dimension of creating or assigning a meaningful existence to that represented ‘something’. It is, however, quite pertinent to uphold one very significant fact under consideration that the act of representation of ‘something’ or ‘someone’ is carried out by some agency which/who is not always an insider and very likely to be guided by its/his subjective prejudices resulting in a fallacious representation. Tribal in India and their representation since the colonial period may be seen as an area of potential discontentment and dispute owing to the misrepresentation of their life-world and cultural ethos as a result of acute ignorance and deliberate effort at continuation of certain stereotypes.

Anthropology as a branch of modern studies in the colonial condition may be seen as an instrument of the larger colonial interest to explore the colonized subject better with an intention of paving a smooth route of European enlightenment into the Conradian darkness of the ‘heathen’ native. Colonial anthropology unquestionably documented and recorded new findings based on studies undertaken in the colonies but it also appropriated the evil design associated with the apparent colonial exploits that contributed to the shaping of colonial economy to a large extent. The appropriation of colonial enterprise was carried out at the cost of the misrepresentation of the colonized that involved racial subordination and depiction as degenerate species that further appropriated the social, political and economic intervention required for a paradigmatic transformation of the colonized by way of erasure of their socio-cultural ethos. However, the mode of intervention, as mentioned earlier, did not have a definite set of norms hence varied in degree according to the circumstances. Anthropological survey on the regions dominated by tribal people of India, *inter alia*, was undertaken by the colonial administration to study the ‘noble savages’ with a sole perspective of carrying out their governance in a subtler manner. Needless to mention that the entire practice was not holistic in nature given the strict adherence to the ‘self/other’ dichotomy of European model designed to assist the colonial enterprise. Establishment and perpetuation of colonial occupancy required a deeper penetration into the colonial body and therefore it was necessary for the colonizers to reinforce the difference between the colonial ‘self’ and the ‘other’. Anthropology, as a study of mankind in the general sense, was a conduit of appropriation of the colonial self, thereby allowing the legitimacy of situating the self in an authorial position of constructing the ‘other’ through a reductive representation. The natives became an object of colonial gaze, or precisely a case study in the anthropological terms, that followed a preconceived Eurocentric approach of racial superiority at the subconscious level. Poised and certified as a work of scientific observation,

colonial narratives soon replaced the oral narrative of the native population, especially the tribal, and confirmed their authorial position with endorsement of written culture as the only means to justify truth. Colonial representation was thus guided by the racist subconscious that negated every positive attributes associated with the colonized reducing their life-world into ignominious obscurity.

Pramod K. Nayar in his work *Colonial Voices: The Discourses of Empire* (2012) states, "Colonial discourse masks the power relations between races, cultures and nations. It makes the relations seem natural, scientific and objective. Colonial discourse therefore produces stereotypes from within European prejudices, beliefs and myths" (3). Nayar's argument points out the politics involved in the process of 'othering' of the non-west or in the construction of what Edward Said defined as the 'orient' in his book *Orientalism* (1995). Corresponding to the problematic area on which the process of colonial representation of the Orient is rested, Said argues, "the exteriority of the representation is always governed by some version of the truism that if the Orient could represent itself, it would; since it cannot, the representation does the job, for the West, and *faute de mieux*, for the poor Orient" (21).

Anthropological texts that may be seen as a major constituent area of the colonial discourse of representation of the native, as described by Nayar, conceal the conflict of power that comes into play in the exercise of colonial takeover of a certain geographical area. The conflict of power is permeated into every portion of both the colonizer and the colonized that reveals its effect in every dialogue these two sides tend to establish. The conflict of power gradually is corroborated into a relation of power as the colonized is systematically forced to accept both conscious and subconscious subordination. Relaying of the relation of power may be understood as an inevitable phenomenon given the racist nature of British colonialism in India. However, the colonial consciousness is aware of the fact that the consequences of slight disturbance in the power relation may be the displacement of the authorial position in the context of colonial condition for the relation rests on a rather fragile frame. Therefore, the colonial discourse is systematically fashioned to disseminate every colonial construct on the colonized as objective endeavor administered with scientific approach for ensuring the appropriation of colonial hierarchy in the power relation. The stereotypes constructed in the colonial discourse is fashioned as the grand narrative of understanding the colonial 'other' in the "Manichaean world" as described by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (2001).

Colonial discourse was not always based on the coercive power of the colonial administration but emerged largely leaning on the civilizing mission of the colonial mind and submissive acceptance of the European supremacy by rejection of the 'native self' on the part of the colonized. Configuration and development of colonial discourse takes place much in the similar plane of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) as explained by Louis Althusser in his seminal essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1971). Althusser

argues that state apparatuses are not always repressive in nature for to win the consent of a larger mass, coercion may not be the appropriate method. Therefore, the state permeates its power in a subtler manner on the ideological plane that works on the psychological level with a view of arresting and controlling the imagination of the mass and eventually acquires their consent (Althusser 149-150). However, in colonial conditions the consent of the natives does not hold importance for “the native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also negation of values...he is the depository of maleficent powers, the unconscious and irretrievable instrument of blind forces” (Fanon 32). The construction of colonial discourse involves an organized approach of negation, reduction and finally complete erasure of socio-cultural ethos from the native consciousness. The blank space of the native consciousness is then filled in with the colonial pattern of civilization with a mission of refining the heathen culture of the natives for in Rudyard Kipling’s words it was the burden of the white man to put an end to the irrationality and inertia associated with the native culture of the erstwhile colonies.

The Ethnographic texts and government records that came out of the anthropological surveys classified all the tribal population together on racial ground for the convenience of colonial administration without making any attempt at understanding certain cultural, social, linguistic and characteristic differences that existed within the singular classification ascribed to different tribes. G. N. Devy in his introduction to the book *The Oxford India Elwin* (2009) argues, “The term ‘tribal’ had been in use among European merchants and travelers in India from the seventeenth century, but it was used in a very generic sense” (xv). He further opines that the representation of the tribal as a set of people yet to have touched by the ideas of enlightenment and hence barbaric in nature in the European sense, further led to the formulation of legislation called the Criminal Act, 1871 in India (Devy xv). The formulation of the Criminal Act, 1871 not only characterized the tribal in India as primitive in nature but also devalued the entire civilization that may have existed before colonial takeover. In this context Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994) maintains that the purpose of ethnographic texts was to “construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction” (154). Bhabha in his argument indicates a well constructed roadmap employed by the colonial administration primarily for appropriating their authoritative position and political occupancy of a foreign land thitherto inhabited by certain indigenous population within the map of their colonial administration by way of systematic and regimented fabrication of the knowledge of the ‘other’. Ethnographic texts written by the colonial administrators and travelers including the Christian missionaries became the instrument of appropriation of colonial occupancy and territorial expansion for it is through these documents the ‘other’ of Europe was fashioned and ascribed an identity by way of contrasting and comparing how the ‘other’ is different from the European ‘self’. Fallacious representation of the tribal during colonial period was more a deliberate occurrence than a chance oversight

for it was always nestled on the frame of racial prejudice on the part of the ethnographers. Given the fact that the colonial ethnographic texts were fraught in certain administrative control and racial intent as far as representation of the colonized was concerned, the rationale of authentic and objective representation was perceptibly unjustified.

This paper further undertakes to examine the representation of tribal in Indian fiction for it is a genre where the author enjoys certain amount of liberty in dealing with the truth that apparently provides more space and possibility to authentic representation. Fiction is primarily a work of art which entails its authenticity of expression and treatment of the subject with adequate sensitivity and sensibility. It may therefore be assumed that fiction writing involves deeper understanding of the socio-cultural fabric of the tribal by exploration of the inner dynamics of their worldview with better clarity. Nevertheless, it is pertinent to note that even the fictions written by European writers during the colonial period were not free from racial prejudices and served as a supplement to the construction of tribal stereotypes by stripping them of their socio-cultural values. In this context Anand Mahanand in *Representations of Tribal India in Fiction* (2011) argues:

...the rise of anthropology and ethnography in the colonial era helped in establishing fieldwork as a methodology for imperial rule. In this context, it is interesting to see how tribal India was depicted in colonial fiction and ethnography. There have been several attempts to represent different tribes in ethnography and fiction by the Anglo-Indian writers during the colonial period. These writings on the tribals evoked different kinds of images and feed into the ethnographical and administrative inputs to colonial discourse. (48-49)

Mahanand's argument clearly indicates the inherent political angle involved in the representation of tribal India in colonial discourse. Anthropology as an instrument of gathering knowledge about the tribal life-world was designed to serve the purpose of adding further inputs to the grand narrative of colonial discourse being guided by colonial interest. In the post-independence era India witnessed several authentic works of fiction as well as non-fiction by Indian writers that aimed at building the foundation of Indian literature. Nonetheless, representation of the tribal reality in fiction was very rare till recently before the arrival of writers like Mahashweta Devi, Gopinath Mohanty, Sitakanta Mahapatra, Pratibha Ray, Gayatri Spivak Chakravarty, Temsula Ao, Yeshe Dorje Thongshi, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya and until recently Mamang Dai and Easterine Kire. Gopinath Mohany's *Paraja* (2008) and Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) are two prominent examples of such fictional narratives that narrate the reality of tribal people as racially, politically, socially and economically marginalized in their own land in the face of modernity. Mohanty's *Paraja* is the representation of Paraja tribe of Koraput region of Orissa by an outsider; on the other hand, Dai's *Legends of Pensam* is an attempt at representation of the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh by an insider. This paper

makes a comparative study of the views of an outsider and an insider for the purpose of understanding the inner dynamics of representation of the tribal in Indian context.

Stuart Hall in his essay “The Work of Representation” (1997) suggests three approaches to representation- reflective, intentional and constructionist. He also suggests in the same essay that representation essentially is dependent on language for it is language that works as the ‘media’ of representation. The precondition to a successful representation is the use of a common language so that the concept of the represented body is conveyed in a meaningful manner and the existence of the represented body receives recognition with the assigning of a meaning to it. Language thus holds importance in the process of representation and construction of meaning. Language, however, adds further problem to the discourse of representation for meaning or truth is slippery in nature pertaining to the arbitrariness of language and constant play of signifier and signified in the sign system. In his essay, Hall is rather sceptic about the reflective or mimetic and intentional approaches to representation. According to him it is the constructionist approach that is more relevant as far as the production of meaning is concerned. Through representation meaning is constructed in relation to the public and social language rather than exact imitation of the perceived or guiding something according to one’s intention. Imitation and intention may be totally private in nature and hence does not necessarily correspond to the shared reality of the public. A meaningful representation is possible only when carried out through a sign system that is common to all as Hall maintains, “...meaning depends, not on the material quality of the sign, but on its symbolic function. It is because a particular sound or word stands for, symbolizes or represents a concept that it can function, in language, as a sign and convey meaning...” (26).

Meaning of a text is never stable owing to the continuous play of signifier and signified in the process of signification and therefore ‘absolute truth’ is never fixed but perpetuates new meanings and new interpretations in every reading of the representation. The relation of representation to language and society further suggests its relation to the power structure that permeates throughout the society where the meaning or truth is constructed and given currency. Michel Foucault in his deliberation on “Truth and Power” in an interview published in the book *Power/Knowledge* (1980) argues:

Truth isn’t outside power. Truth is a thing of this world; it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth; that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true, the mechanisms and instances which enables one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned, the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (131)

Foucault’s comment on the production of truth or absolute meaning and its apparent relation to the power structure calls for diverse potential interpretation

of the preconceived idea of the term tribal and its representation. The “regime of truth” of a particular society holds the totality of power in the society as well as the language and it can regulate the process of representation by virtue of its authority to sanction recognition to the represented body within its discourse. It is however pertinent to note that before getting a statutory recognition as per the dictate of the “regime of truth”, the process of representation is required to travel through a series of filtration, appropriation and even obliteration. Representation thus culminates in acting like a perforated sheet that demonstrates a distorted substitute of the real. The substitution of the real further causes damage to the entirety of the represented body for the substituted image seemingly misguides the perception of the audience. Furthermore, representation may also be seen as an instrument of shrouding certain facts that the “regime of truth” deems inappropriate and precarious to its interest and hence a false image of the real substance is presented for display.

Examination of representational politics concerning the tribal of India under the above discussed theoretical parameter further induces certain fundamental questions of who, why and how it is conducted for it is quite apparent that certain political agency comes into play in the entire process with its vested interest resting behind the unseen patches of the perforated sheet of representation.

The story of *Paraja* is set on the life of the Paraja tribe of Koraput region of Orissa at the backdrop of advancing modernity into the serene and primordial life of the tribe surrounded by forest and mountains. Jnanpith awardee Oriya writer Gopinath Mohanty wrote the novel in 1945 (Translated into English and first published in 1987) in Oriya language in colonial India but his depiction of the tribal reality strongly commands relevance with its exploration of the darker areas that remain untouched in the romanticized depiction of tribal life in majority of the mainstream literature of his contemporary times. Unlike the colonial European writers, Mohanty offers an insight of the tribal reality in an authentic manner by focusing upon the predicament of his protagonists in the face of rapid modernization of the tribal lands. Modernity makes an inroad into the tribal reality in the form of Sahukar Mahajan (Moneylender) and a forest officer who introduce two completely new and alien elements – monetary economy and administrative control to the seemingly composed and content life of the Paraja without much anticipatory thought on how it would affect the tribal life. Introduction of modernity and the idea of modern civil society may be seen as analogous to the negation of tribal rights over their territory and destruction of tribal mode of socio-economic sustenance. It is pertinent to mention here that tribal economy was based on barter system before the introduction of monetary economy and their society ran on their own system of governance before the imposition of modern administration. Mohanty shows how the introduction of money and administrative constraints robbed every right of the tribal on their land and forest and left them with nothing but disbelief and discontentment in the modern concept of welfare society. The Sahukar woos the villagers with his

money while the forest guard uses the law to enforce his power and thus manipulate and pollute the sanctity of the forest. Mohanty's novel is a critique of the feasibility of modernization in tribal land without proper infrastructural transformation and education. Mohanty's ironical depiction of the tribal reality concentrates on the unreasonable manner of imposing restrictive forest laws on those who do not have the slightest inkling of the nature of restrictions that have been enforced upon them. The policy makers of the British government do not seem to realize that the precondition to enforcement of any law is proper awareness and empowerment of the mass. The novel, however, presents an opposite circumstance in which new restrictions were imposed on the tribal to curb their free access to forest resources without any measure to compensate the loss of freedom that they enjoyed for generations. He observes that introduction of modernity apparently caused complete destruction of tribal economy and disorientation of pre-existent social balance.

The novel provides a detailed probing into the social structure of the Paraja tribe which is based on indigenous political system of chiefdom. A Paraja man seeks the permission of the village headman and takes everything that he needs from the forest without having to bother about taxation. The forest provided all their needs and thus a symbiotic relation was forged between man and nature. The forest had never been viewed as a means of acquiring economic profit by the Paraja. However, with the enforcement of forest laws in India by the British government, restriction was enforced on free access to forest resources and the symbiotic relation was completely damaged. Enforcement of Forest Laws may also be understood as negation of the age old hierarchy of Paraja chiefdom. Violation of the Forest Laws meant indulgence in criminal offence that led to imprisonment or payment of a huge sum as fine that eventually contributed to the revenue collection of the state. Poverty creeps into the lives of the Paraja tribe with the collapse of their traditional mode of production and economic sustenance and it augments the germination of greed, treachery and disbelief in a social fabric based on community living and social cooperation. It, however, served the purpose of curving out an easy route to drain every resource from the tribal land to the mainstream society to benefit the outsiders and significantly the state for "every villager owning a pair of bullock had to pay a 'plough tax' for the privilege of grazing his cattle in the forest, and the Forest Guard collected the tax" (11).

The main protagonist Sukru Jani and his family suffer different levels of exploitation at the backdrop of such transformation of socio-economic condition and end up becoming 'Gotis' or bonded labourers of the Sahukar which symbolically represents the condition of the tribal and their predicament in Indian context. Like other Paraja man Sukru Jani makes his living by farming in a small clearing in the midst of the forest and occasional access to the readily available resources from the forest such as edible herbs and firewood. However, in an attempt to expand his farmland he starts felling few trees from the forest unaware of the consequences of violating the Forest Laws. Sukru Jani is

sentenced as an offender of the laws and fined with an amount that he cannot pay without mortgaging his tiny piece of land. He somehow manages to save himself from being imprisoned by paying the fine but indirectly treads into the labyrinthine imprisonment of debts when he asks for loan from the Sahukar. Illiterate Sukru and his sons do not understand the calculations of loan interest and thus their service to the Sahukar as Gotis never end. They serve as 'gotis' at the farmlands owned by the Sahukar in the hope of repaying loan with physical labour as they have nothing left at their disposal for repayment but they further sink into the pits of debts. Sukru and his sons know that they have been subjected to exploitation but they have no possible route to escape the exploitation. The exploitation of the state runs in tandem with the physical and economic exploitation of the likes of Sukru Jani in a rather dehumanizing fashion.

Jili, the elder daughter of Sukru Jani, symbolically represents the symbiotic coexistence of pristine forest and innocence of the Paraja tribe that receives a major blow due to the onslaught of outsider's aggression and greed. Jili becomes the object of outsider's gaze due to her gender when the visiting Forest Guard tries to take her advantage for his apparent sexual gratification. When thwarted that attempt by Jili, the Forest Guard avenges the insult to his manhood by exercising his power on Sukru Jani and his family on a stage managed allegation of unlawfully felling the trees in the forest.

In the later part of the novel, Jili again becomes the object of the Sahukar's sexual desire that causes her social exclusion from her own society. The Sahukar agrees to pay the bride price for Jili when confronted by the village council which also explains the Sahukar's compliance to the customary rules of the Paraja at that particular moment. But at the end the Sahukar blurts out his evil design in a fit of anger when he says, "Yes Jili! And isn't there another called Bili at home still? Bring her to me. I've taken the land; I've taken one sister; and I shall take the other too, I shall take your wives...I shall make you sweat out your lives as gotis" (372). The compliance of the Sahukar to the customs of the Paraja in front of the village council on the first occasion may therefore be understood as a trope for calming the angry mob of the villagers which was necessary for the complete execution of his plan of capturing the entire tribal land with his business of money-lending.

The novel also focuses on the construction of a road into the villages of the Paraja tribe as a means of communication with the external society. Construction of a road is without any doubt a development in positive direction for it promises better accessibility to the remote areas. However, in the novel Mohanty seems to be rather sceptic with such development for a road may also be seen as a means of extracting natural resources from the tribal areas. Furthermore, the road also brings more outsiders such as construction workers, road contractors and money regulated market indicating a bigger threat to the sustainability of the tribal society. For example, the road contractor uses his money to lure the girls from the village for his ulterior motive of sexually exploiting them. Both the daughters of Sukru Jani succumb to the allurement of the contractor and end up losing their

dignity for money. It is pertinent to mention that in Paraja society young man and woman have the freedom of choosing their partners in the youth dormitory of the village. Mohanty observes:

In the centre of the village was a hut which served as a dormitory for all the unmarried girls in the village, while little way off was the men's dormitory. It was an ancient Paraja custom for all unmarried boys and girls to sleep in their respective dormitories, rather than in their parents' homes. (Mohanty 14-15)

It is in the dormitory where Jili meets her beloved Bagla before marriage without social restriction. But their meeting does not turn into physical intimacy and they maintain the sacredness of their love despite all the freedom of transgressing the social norms. While on the later occasion when Jili comes into contact with the contractor, she is overtaken by money induced greed. She submits herself to the contractor not out of love but for the money that would ensure availability of food at home during the absence of her father and brothers who are serving as Gotis at the Sahukar's house.

Like other Paraja people, Sukru Jani and his family led a self-sufficient and content life with the sense of pride and honour identical to every tribal society by the side of the forest that yielded everything that they needed. However, their sense of pride and honour is completely trampled upon with the imposition of certain restrictions on the access of the forest and their independent movement that came at the pretext of modernity and social change. Monetary economy robbed everything from the Paraja tribe including their dignity rendering them with poverty and servitude.

Padma Shri awardee writer, journalist and former civil servant Mamang Dai's novel *The Legends of Pensam*, published in 2006, narrates the oral myths of Adi tribe juxtaposing against rapid modernization in Arunachal Pradesh. The novel interconnects three episodes of different stories with a loosely connected line of continuity and employs magic realism to convey the reality of the tribe. Her choice of magic realism in narrating the stories of her tribe is apparently deliberate for the reality of the tribe from the easternmost frontier of Indian nation state may not be considered analogous to the reality of mainland India and as such the techniques employed by the mainstream writers in the depiction of reality may not do justice to the reality of her community. Tribal gods and demigods are recurrently mentioned in the narrative and made a part of the tribal life-world by way of drawing a semblance of the two contradictory worlds of real and unreal. The intended purpose of the technique employed by the writer may be understood as a statement of disapproval of the homogenization of the tribal or the Northeast as a singular entity. The cultural loss and negotiation that occurred in the context of Northeastern tribal communities of India under the rubrics of colonial representation and encounter with the majoritarian cultures of the mainland India in the postcolonial condition calls for a new pattern of representation. Colonial representation based on empirical knowledge of the anthropological study seemingly finds itself at loss to comprehend the

significance of certain socio-cultural habits of the tribal due to the approach espoused on the dichotomous relation of the 'self' and the 'other'. One cannot agree more that the colonial 'self/ other' binary still holds relevance in the representations of the tribal in India given that the ethnic and linguistic minority seldom finds any room for proper representation in a majoritarian society.

Here, modernity is presented through the symbols of road as the machinery of institutionalization of the structure of power of the state in tribal areas. She offers a critique of rapid modernization making its inroad with the construction of a concrete road and the seemingly disastrous consequences it causes to the pristine natural environment and content life of the tribal. The road is not considered as a good omen as Larik, son of Togla gives vent to the frustration of the tribal as he puts it, "This one terrible road is all they have managed for us in fifty years! And what does it bring us? Outsiders. Thieves. Disease. Will this road bring us good health? A new school?" (156). The words of Larik reverberate in a cacophonic note in the narration of the serenity that pervades the hilly terrain but serves the purpose of breaking the slumber to face the reality in a clearer sight. The construction of road rightly represents the milestone of development and administrative presence of the state but it inversely may also be understood as the conveyance of external elements that swarm the tribal lands for potential exploits. A road opens new opportunities for trade and commerce but proportionate economic benefit of both the sides is seldom ensured. Political activism, public awareness, better health services and prospects of better education among the general public is hardly visible in spite of the easy access of the remote mountains of Arunachal Pradesh. The new generation of Arunachal Pradesh like Larik find themselves caught in delusion and uncertainty at the backdrop of disproportionate distribution in terms of basic amenities. The road that promises development fails to address the expectations of the indigenous population and instead turns out to be the channel of extraction. The road in her narration symbolizes the intrusion of external forces with gradual enforcement of power and economic takeover through the negotiation between tribal life-worlds and modern agencies. In this negotiation, tribal right to its land and forest is exposed to a greater risk for the idiom of modern administration and development is completely alien to the tribal. Dai tries to explore the condition of marginality and exploitation meted out to the tribal at the backdrop of massive corruption and propagandist developmental progress in tribal areas.

Mamang Dai delivers an eco-critical reading of tribal reality and digs further into the fundamental problem of structural failure of the design of introducing modernity to a society that is based on the bedrock of coexistence with nature. In a story narrated by the character named Hoxo, in the chapter titled "Small Histories Recalled in the Season of Rain", he tells the oral narrative of the harmonious co-existence of man and spirits in "a green and virgin land under a gracious and just rule" (42). It was a society based on mutual understanding and respect of the symbiotic relation that humans established

with nature and spirits. But humans started felling the trees out of greed causing damage to the balance of the two parallel worlds and the delicate thread of relation was broken resulting in a massive change in the old order of the society. Hoxo further laments that “the canopy of shelter and tradition had fallen” with the destruction of the forest (42). The story narrated by Hoxo insinuates that the knowledge of ecological balance was a part of the tribal tradition but this knowledge became irrelevant in the greed induced rat-race of growth and development of human civilization. Apart from telling the unpleasant truth of marginalization of the tribal, she also narrates the myths and cultural beliefs of the tribe by reinforcing the shared experiences of her people where the supernatural elements command certain importance and thereby become an integral part. For Mamang Dai the shamans, demigods and paranormal occurrences are not constructs of fictional romanticism or parts of the colonial occult but the very reality that the tribal inhabits and therefore cannot be left out of the representation.

Authentic representation of the tribal in Indian writing is getting momentum of late as many writers within the tribal community have started voicing their lived experiences in fiction and other forms of representations. Representation unquestionably calls for further examination on merit for it is always vulnerable to different layers of prejudices pertaining to the temporality of fixity of meanings. Both Gopinath Mohanty and Mamang Dai engage in an objective depiction of the tribal reality by acute denial of colonial romantic rendering and bring forth certain issues hitherto unattended or deliberately ignored. Their projection of tribal reality is not based on the colonial gaze enmeshed with the self/other binary but a depiction of the shared reality gained from first hand experiences that further call for exploration and examination of the political agency involved in the process of representation.

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## **STRIKING A BALANCE BETWEEN THE MALE AND THE FEMALE PRINCIPLES : A READING OF ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART* AND *ANTHILLS OF THE SAVANNAH***

**Lakshminath Kagyung**

### **Abstract**

Through a reading of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), this paper attempts to examine the Igbo society's attitude towards gender relations. The paper would study the gender stereotypes and the existing hierarchy in the Igbo society to assess the position of the Igbo women. An attempt is made to examine the provisions for checks and balances of power in the traditional Igbo society to see how it affects the genders. The paper would discuss the changes that have come to Igbo society's attitude towards gender relations by tracing the trajectory from *Things Fall Apart* to *Anthills of the Savannah*. Finally, an attempt would be made to examine the representation of women in Achebe's novels. The paper emphasises the importance of maintaining a balance between the male and the female principles and posits that the inability to maintain a balance between the two principles led to the tragedy/ downfall of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*. The traditional Igbo society depicted in *Things Fall Apart* is overtly androcentric; however, the paper contends that society designed its norms and systems to balance the male and the female principles. Okonkwo could not appreciate and comprehend the balance of his culture, and that led to his downfall. The paper argues that Achebe understands and realises the importance of the balance between the male and the female principles for the proper functioning and development of the Igbo society and that he is not gendered/ biased in his representation of women characters in his novels. The methodology used in the paper involves a close reading of the primary texts using African indigenous ideas on power and gender relations as the theoretical frame of references. The paper would also take recourse to Buchi Emecheta's ideas on gender relations for a clearer understanding of the subject of research.

**Keywords :** Gender-relations, gender-stereotypes, hierarchy, power, androcentric and representation.

In "Re-Imagining Gender in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*", Christopher Anyokwo, emphasising the importance of the balance between the male and the female principles, re-reads and re-interprets gender relations in *Things Fall Apart*. He does not glorify the much-eulogised manliness of

Okonkwo; instead, he is critical about the same. For him, the thoughtfulness and pragmatism of Obierika are more praiseworthy than Okonkwo's rigid and unreflecting attitude. Anyokwo believes that Achebe to highlight and justify the importance of imagination and thoughtfulness over rigidity and physical energy or brute force brings the downfall of Okonkwo. He says that Achebe has deliberately played a trick on Okonkwo by imbuing a girl (Ezinma) with male traits and a boy (Nwoye) with female characteristics. In "Achebe and his Women: A Social Science Perspective", Merun Nasser asseverates that Anglophone African writers in their writings have often portrayed women in a subservient role. He argues that Achebe, one of the most important and well-known Anglophone African novelists, has not done much to represent women properly in his novels. According to him, in his novels, Achebe merely uses the female characters to develop his male characters. In "Sexual/ Textual Politics: Representation of Gender in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*", Saba Shouq states that Achebe has given more significant space to and emphasis in representing his male characters in his novel *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe took such a stance, she opines, because of the overtly androcentric nature of the Igbo society where a man was all-important and where women played a subservient role. She claims that the novel's structure speaks volumes about the Igbo society's patriarchal social set up, which often subdued the voice of women. She highlights that many chapters in the novel begin with the name of Okonkwo, the male protagonist of the novel. The name of Okonkwo's mother is never mentioned in the novel. The Igbo women also participated in the cultivation process, and the house's running, but the society seldom acknowledged their role. Precisely, in the article, she is highlighting the gendered nature of the Igbo society. She criticises Achebe for participating and encouraging such gender-biased nature of the society and for not taking any specific measures against it in his writings. There is an ongoing discussion on gender relations in Achebe's novels. This paper would try to participate in and continue the discussion to contribute to the domain of knowledge.

It is evident from a reading of Achebe's novels, particularly *Things Fall Apart* and *Anthills of the Savannah*, that the Igbo societies depicted there were excessively patriarchal, which often suppressed the voice of women and made them play a subservient role. It was a lopsided kind of social set up where men enjoyed ultimate power and authority over women. Some critics believe that Achebe, as a writer, did not do much for the cause of the Igbo women of his society. According to them, Achebe, in his novels, simply portrayed the lopsided nature of the society as regards gender relations without making an effort to give an appropriate voice to and space for the female characters. However, one may argue that a deeper reading of his novels speaks otherwise. There is no denying that the Igbo society of Achebe's novels is overtly and excessively androcentric. Achebe, who claims himself to be a novelist and a teacher, considers it his duty to provide a realistic depiction of the African society in his novels. Since the African society depicted in his novels is androcentric, it is obvious that the male characters will find greater representation in his novels. However, the fact that the male characters find greater representation in his novels does not mean that

Achebe does not think and realise the importance of the female characters. It will be a biased assessment to say that Achebe did not properly represent the women characters in his novels.

By male principles, the paper refers to qualities like raw physical strength, brute energy, aggressiveness, love for violence and bloodshed, and by female principles, it refers to qualities such as patience, pragmatism, thoughtfulness, imagination and having cerebral strength. In “Re-Imagining Gender in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*”, Anyokwo asseverates that the Igbo traditional culture and society were phallocratic. Society prioritised male principles like brute energy, aggressiveness, love for danger and bloodshed over womanly qualities like patience, thoughtfulness, pragmatic and circumspect behaviour. Moreover, traits like talkativeness, cantankerousness, feblemindedness, fearfulness, inconstancy and unreliability were often associated with women.

The Igbo society represented in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* is androcentric. It seems men in/ of that society enjoyed unlimited power and authority over their women. Physical valour and courage were respected in that society. By virtue of his physical prowess, Okonkwo rose to fame and became successful in life at an early age. His success justifies the Igbo saying: “If a child washed his hands he could eat with kings” (*Things Fall Apart* 6). In the Umuofian society in *Things Fall Apart*, the number of barns a man had determined his social position; the more the number of barns, the greater was the man’s social status. The Umuofian society was agrarian; to have more barns, a man had to be physically powerful. That was how the idea of masculinity came into being, and that was why masculine traits were adored and respected in that society. The number of wives a man had was another factor to determine the social position in the Umuofian society. A man of higher social position generally had more wives. It may be argued, to have more barns, one would need more manpower to work in the field, and having more wives served that purpose. Moreover, having more wives would also mean that eventually, one will have more children or, precisely, more hands to assist in cultivation.

The androcentric nature of the Umuofian society in *Things Fall Apart* has put men at the centre. Men had almost become omnipotent in that society. Many narratives/discourses were framed to valorise masculine traits and to sustain male dominance. Masculinity or manliness was associated with the ability to dominate one’s wife. “No matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and his children, he was not really a man” (*Things Fall Apart* 37). Such kinds of narratives or beliefs encouraged physical violence in the garb of masculinity. Violence and bloodshed were regarded as manly attributes; Okonkwo, in *Things Fall Apart*, tried to inculcate such traits in his sons. In “Things Standing Together: A Retrospect of *Things Fall Apart*”, Derek Wright states that Okonkwo’s cult of virility mistakes the nature of courage and confuses gentleness with weakness. That was the reason why Okonkwo abhorred anything that reminded him of his father, Unoka. Unoka did not fit into Umuofia’s idea of manliness. He liked to spend his time roaming around idly, playing musical

instruments. He was a peace-loving person and abhorred violence. Umuofia did not appreciate that kind of behaviour of a man. According to Umuofian belief, a man must be strong, courageous and must love violence and bloodshed. If a man lacks these qualities, he will be regarded as "womanly" or "agbala". The African word "agbala"<sup>1</sup> means both "a woman" and/or "a man who has no title". In Umuofia, the word "agbala" was often used in a derogatory manner; it referred to a weak man who did not have a title or a high social position.

In "Sexual/ Textual Politics: Representation of Gender in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*", Saba Shouq states that Achebe, in his novels, supports and glorifies the androcentric nature of the Igbo society. By doing so, she argues, Achebe is participating in encouraging and propagating patriarchy. She asseverates, Achebe has consciously ordered his text in a way that by reading the opening lines of the first chapter, one can understand the position of males in the African culture. It has been rightly pointed out that six chapters of the novel, namely— chapters 1, 2, 3, 8, 14 and 24, begin with Okonkwo's name. The reason Achebe foregrounds his hero's name and gives details about his personality is perhaps to highlight the social positioning of the male protagonist and to delineate the social structure of male dominance in the Igbo society. Saba Shouq is also critical of Achebe's lopsided representation of his male characters in relation to his female characters. She is of the opinion that the female characters in Achebe's novels do not find the same space as that of the males. It is pertinent to mention here that Achebe, throughout his novel *Things Fall Apart*, do not tell the readers the name of Okonkwo's mother. On the contrary, Unoka, Okonkwo's father, has been described at length in the first chapter. In "Sexual/ Textual Politics: Representation of Gender in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*", Saba Shouq criticises Achebe for such a biased representation on the basis of gender. However, it would be unfair and superficial to label Achebe gendered on the basis of the above example. For, later in the novel, one can see Achebe emphasising the significance of a mother in a man's life. When Okonkwo was exiled, he was provided shelter in his mother's place. That was perhaps the reason why the Ibos buried their women with her kinsman and not with the kinsman of her husband. Therefore, the mother was regarded supreme. When the father beats the child, it is the mother who gives shelter to the child.

Achebe has given greater space for the description of Unoka; however, he does not provide the same space for the description of Okonkwo's mother. It should be noted that though Achebe has provided greater space for the representation of Unoka, however, he has not presented Unoka in a positive light. According to the social standards of the Igbo community, Unoka is not a successful man. However, it seems that in presenting the character of Unoka in such a light, Achebe is cautioning people not to be like Unoka. Thus, Saba Shouq's argument that Achebe is gendered in his representation of male and female characters holds some ground. However, it would be too superficial an assessment to say that Achebe is taking side with the patriarchal man; he is simply trying to present a realistic picture of the Igbo societal set up.

In the Umuofian society shown in *Things Fall Apart*, there was a gendered division of crops. Crops were categorised as men's crop and women's crop. Yam, the king of crops, was called a man's crop because of the intense muscular effort involved in its cultivation. In contrast, crops like cassava and beans were regarded as woman's crop because they did not involve much physical strength for their cultivation. So, one can comprehend how the Igbo society upheld masculine traits like raw physical strength. In "Re-Imagining Gender in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*", Christopher Anyokwu has referred to the cultivation of Yam as an exclusively sexist occupation that gave primacy to the open demonstration of strength. It is not that only men contributed their labour in the process of cultivation; woman also participated equally in the process; however, the efforts of the women were not given equal appreciation as was given to the efforts of the men.

Cultivating food crops in a distant land by clearing virgin forest was considered masculine while tilling the ground near homestead like Unoka was regarded as womanish or unmanly. In the traditional Igbo society shown in *Things Fall Apart*, there was a gendered division of crime. There, crime was of two kinds— male and female. Okonkwo's crime of killing his kinsman was regarded as a female crime because it was committed inadvertently. If the crime was committed intentionally, it would have been considered a male crime. The punishment for the male crime was more severe than that of the female crime. It may be pointed out that the Igbo men did not only receive the larger share of the good, they also had to receive the greater share of the worst.

In "Sexual/ Textual Politics: Representation of Gender in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*", Saba Shouq posits that the similes used by Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* to represent the African culture were also gendered. This is evident in Okonkwo's reference to Ikemefuna: "He grew like a yam tendril in the rainy season..." (*Things Fall Apart* 37).

It is obvious from a reading of *Things Fall Apart* that Umuofian man was at the centre of the social set up and his honour was of utmost importance. However, an objective reading of the text reveals that for Umuofia, the honour of their daughter was also of equal importance. When a daughter of Umuofia was killed in a market in Mbaino, Umuofia did not hesitate to go to war against Mbaino for the honour of their daughter.

In the Umuofian society shown in *Things Fall Apart*, certain gender stereotypes are evident. Okonkwo shouted at Ezinma to "sit like a woman!" and she "brought her two legs together and stretched them in front of her" (*Things Fall Apart* 32). Further, Okonkwo always regretted that Nwoye was not manly in his behaviour. He was fond of Ikemefuna because the boy had the manly traits of the Umuofian standard, traits which Okonkwo wished his own son had. Okonkwo wanted "Nwoye to grow into a tough young man capable of ruling his father's household when he was dead and gone to join the ancestors" (*Things Fall Apart* 37).

The Igbo society shown in *Things Fall Apart* is an androcentric and phallocratic society. That society had well defined hierarchical set up as regards its men and women. Such hierarchy is evident when Achebe mentions: "It was clear from the way the crowd stood or sat that the ceremony was for men. There were many women, but they looked on from the fringe like outsiders" (*Things Fall Apart* 63). The above instance speaks volumes about the position of women in the Igbo society. They were pushed to the periphery, and their voices were subdued. It may very well be argued that for the proper development of a society, the opinions of both the male and the female members are important. However, when the women are not provided with an opportunity to place their opinion, or if placed, their opinions are not given due consideration, then such a practice or mindset is harmful to the good health of the society.

Hierarchy could be noticed even in the Igbo ways of eating. In communal feast and festivities, the male members were privileged to eat first and had the best part of the food; after that, the senior-most wife of the family ate and only after that the other wives could eat. Irrespective of how hungry one was, one had to strictly adhere to that hierarchy while eating.

The structure of the Igbo house or "obi" also demonstrates the hierarchical nature of the Igbo society. The Igbo society shown in *Things Fall Apart* was a polygamous society. The compound of the Igbo man consisted of the male member's hut and the huts of his wives built in a semi-circular manner in front of his. Achebe describes, Okonkwo "had a large compound enclosed by a thick wall of red earth. His own hut, or obi, stood immediately behind the only gate in the red wall. Each of his three wives had her own hut, which together formed a half moon behind the Obi" (*Things Fall Apart* 10). This kind of architectural pattern of the huts, perhaps, provides the male head with a vantage point to keep surveillance over the huts of his wives. One can perhaps relate this pattern of surveillance to Jeremy Bentham's "panopticon" and Foucault's idea of "panopticism". Moreover, the male head's hut is strategically built near the gate so that he can protect his wives and children from any external threat or invasion. Being the male head of the family, it is his responsibility to protect them from external threats.

However, as regards funeral rights, it was the woman who got priority over the man. If a husband and a wife died on the same day, then the funeral right of the woman was done prior to that of the husband.

In the Igbo society shown in *Things Fall Apart*, the capacity of a woman to bear children determined her social position. Moreover, if a woman could give birth to a male child, she was admired more. That was perhaps the reason why Akueke's suitor and his relatives, when they came with her marriage proposal, "surveyed her young body with expert eyes as if to assure themselves that she was beautiful and ripe" (*Things Fall Apart* 50). Two things might be interpreted from such behaviour of the Ibos. One, the Ibos believed in community life, so the more the number of children better it was for the community. That was why the

suitor and his relatives surveyed the bride's body carefully and ensured that the bride was "ripe". The word ripe here perhaps refers to the maturity of the bride's body to give birth to healthy children. Secondly, this kind of attitude throws light on the Igbo mindset, which perceives that the only function of women was to give birth to healthy children and preferably male children. In "Feminism with a Small 'f'!", Emecheta states that in most African societies, the birth of a son enhances a woman's authority in the family. In *Things Fall Apart*, when Okonkwo's first wife gave birth to three sons in succession, he "slaughtered a goat for her, as was the custom" (*Things Fall Apart* 57).

In *Things Fall Apart*, the Igbos had the custom of observing the "Week of Peace" before plantation. They observed the week of peace to honour the great goddess of earth, Ani, whose blessings the Igbos believed was essential for the crops to prosper. During this week, people lived in peace with their fellows and refrained from using harsh words. However, by beating his wife during the week of peace, Okonkwo had invited the wrath of Ezeani, the priest of the earth goddess, Ani. It can perhaps be said that the custom of observing the week of peace was an exercise in restraint for the Igbo people. This is a wonderful example of the checks and balances practised in the Igbo culture. The earth goddess, Ani, was revered and feared in the androcentric society of the Igbos. Further, the earth goddess had a male priest to follow her bidding. The existence of such a power structure among the Igbos establishes the fact that the Igbos cared for maintaining a balance of power in the society. Umuofia "was powerful in war and in magic, and its priests and medicine men were feared in all the surrounding country" (*Things Fall Apart* 8). However, it is interesting to note that "the active principle in that medicine had been an old woman with one leg. In fact, the medicine itself was called agadi-nwayi, or old woman" (*Things Fall Apart* 8-9).

In *Things Fall Apart*, the Umuofian society did not have courts and prisons. The disputes were often settled by the "egwugwu". Egwugwu were the masked spirits, representing the ancestral spirits of the village. The egwugwu listened to both the parties before providing their judgement on a matter. They often provided impartial and unbiased judgement; they were not gendered in their judgement. The objectivity and impartiality with which they settled a case were very much evident in the statement made by one of the egwugwu: "Our duty is not to blame this man or to praise that, but to settle the dispute" (*Things Fall Apart* 67). In the dispute between Uzowulu and Odukwe, the egwugwu reprimanded the former for beating his wife. They told him, "it is not bravery when a man fights with a woman" (*Things Fall Apart* 67). Here, one may argue that the above statement demonstrates the male ego that considers a woman to be no match to him. However, the paper would contradict such an argument and opine that such a view is gendered. Rather than considering the judgement provided by the egwugwu to be gendered, the paper believes that it shows the sensitivity of the Igbos towards the trouble of their women. One should see it as a measure by the Igbos to restrict the man from committing atrocities on his woman.

Odukwe looking at the innumerable atrocities committed on his sister by Uzowulu, warns him that if he does not mend his ways and beats his wife again, he will "cut off his genitals for him" (*Things Fall Apart* 66). In "Re-Imagining Gender in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*", Anyokwo posits that Achebe, through that statement, must have hinted "at the generally held notion that the male organ, the penis, is the symbolic signifier of power" (Anyokwo 27). By threatening castration, Oduke is telling his in laws that he would make Uzowulu "a 'woman,' thereby effecting 'gender equality'" (Anyokwo 27).

Thus, one can see that the traditional Igbo society devised measures to maintain peace and gender equality in the society. Okonkwo could not appreciate and comprehend the balance of his society, and that led to his downfall. Okonkwo's obsession with masculinity, brute energy and his abhorrence for patience and pragmatic thinking, considering those to be womanly traits, led to his disaster. Precisely, Okonkwo's inability to comprehend and maintain the balance between the male and the female principles brought his downfall. Okonkwo was rigid and had an unreflecting understanding of the laws of the land, while Obierika was more pragmatic and circumspect. Obierika was an example of the balance between the male and the female principles. People like Obierika are the need of the hour. In "Re-Imagining Gender in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*", Anyokwo has very rightly posited that "Okonkwo's pathetic death signifies the demise of androcentric arbitrariness in Umuofia" (29).

If one traces the trajectory from Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) to *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), one can locate a change in society's attitude towards gender relations in that course of time. In *Things Fall Apart*, one could see that the women did not have much say in decision making; the male head decided matters, and the women followed his orders without any protest. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe mentions, Okonkwo's wives "lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper" (*Things Fall Apart* 9). Okonkwo, handing over Ikemefuna to his senior-most wife, told her that the boy belonged to the clan and she needs to look after him. When his wife asked for how long the boy was going to stay with them, Okonkwo gets angry and thunders at her: "Do what you are told woman.... When did you become one of the ndichie<sup>2</sup> of Umuofia?" (*Things Fall Apart* 11). So, it very well evident that the women of the traditional Igbo society did not have much say in the decision making process of the family and the society. However, in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*, we meet a woman like Beatrice who is educated, independent and empowered. She dares to question and subvert certain traditional Igbo beliefs and traditions. For instance, in the traditional Igbo society, the naming ceremony of a baby was performed by a male member; however, here, we see Beatrice performing the naming ceremony of Elewa's daughter. Beatrice had to perform the naming ceremony because Ikem, the father of the baby-girl was dead. So, one can see, with the changing times, women are becoming educated, self-dependent and empowered. In "Feminism with a Small "f"!", Buchi Emecheta emphasising the need for women's education states that she very much wants "to further the education of woman in Africa, because...

education really helps the women" (553). Education makes women empowered and enables them to attain a respectful position in society. In *Anthills of the Savannah*, MM proudly mentions Beatrice's intellectual calibre to his friends, "that girl there sitting meekly and called Beatrice took a walloping honours degree in English from London University. She is better at it than either of us, I can assure you" (57).

Critics like Merun Nasser and Saba Shouq are critical of Achebe's stance on the representation of women in his novels. They believe that Achebe, in his novels, deliberately takes side with the males of the androcentric African societies. However, this paper would like to contradict such a claim. If one objectively looks at the representation of women in his novels, one will realise that such claims do not hold ground. The women in Achebe's novels have less voice than their male counterparts; however, they are represented well by Achebe. It would be too immature to criticise and call Achebe gendered. There is no denying that the Igbo societies shown in Achebe's novels are androcentric and phallogocentric. In such a social set-up, men would definitely find prominence. Being an objective narrator, Achebe presents a realistic picture of such a social set up to his readers. A close, unbiased reading of the novels reveal two things: one, the Igbo society, though overtly androcentric, was sensitive towards the rights of women and had devised measures of checks and balances to maintain gender equality in the society; secondly, Achebe realises and very well understands the importance of the balance between the male and the female principles for the proper functioning and development of the society. Achebe, an erudite novelist, who claims to be the teacher of the society, in/through his novels tries to present an unbiased, realistic picture of the Igbo society. It should be noted that Achebe does not blindly romanticise one and all customs, rituals and traditions of the Ibos. He is critical of the ill customs and traditions of African society. He does not shy away from criticising the flaws of his society in his writings. In *Things Fall Apart*, one can see that the women characters did not have much voice; however, in *Anthills of the Savannah*, one can see them having more voice and greater representation. It is so because society's attitude towards gender relations has changed. Achebe is not gendered; he simply tries to objectively locate, highlight and represent the Igbo society's attitude towards gender relations in his novels.

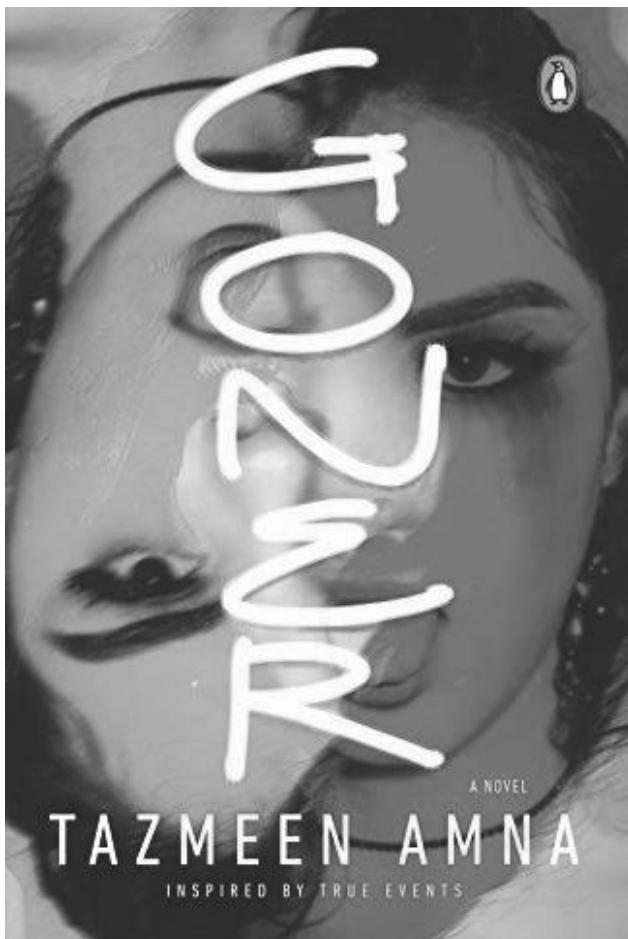
#### **Notes :**

- <sup>1</sup> In *Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure posits that meanings cannot be produced in isolation. He further points out that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and based on convention. So, the meaning of the word "agbala" will depend on the context in which it is used. It may refer to a woman, or it may refer to people like Unoka, who did not have a single title.
- <sup>2</sup> The African word "ndichie" refers to the elders, who meet in councils and make important decisions.

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*pp. 528-530*



**Tazmeen Amna**

**GONER**

Penguin Books. 2020

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**BOOK REVIEW : AN ONEROUS ACHIEVEMENT**

**Anubhav Pradhan**

Some books are difficult to write about. Not because they tell a story which has never been told before, or because they challenge in some fundamental way our sense of self and place in the universe. There are such books, extraordinary works which become pioneering trailblazers and leave a mark on our collective consciousness. And then there are the more regular kind of books, sweet and

light, which leave some small, imperceptible trace of themselves like the flickering memory of quiet sunsets on undisturbed beaches. But some books, some rare books leave one indignant and provoked in equal measure, unsettling that distance with which one tends to pronounce judgment.

Tazmeen Amna's *Goner* is likely to strike most readers as precisely this sort of book. The story, by itself, is nothing new: a young woman has an abusive relationship, is unable to prevent herself from making bad choices, comes dangerously close to self-harm, and eventually hobbles back to recovery with the love and care of her family and friends. This is one of those harsh realities of life with which many of us have grappled: love has remained the same across generations, even if its many travails are dissected much more openly now. Seen with this perspective, there is nothing special or riveting about the life and experiences of Amna's protagonist in *Goner*.

Likewise, the book's claim to be a novel may well seem stretched to many. The narrative appears too diffuse and scattered to meet conventional wisdom on the novelistic form. The tone is a little too conversational, an uneasy crossover of the traditional confessional and the contemporary Ted Talk. Readers may also be left aghast at the unbridled profusion of profanities throughout the text, something most good novelists shy from in pursuit of more impactful characterisation. It does not help that Amna herself encourages us to read the book as a memoir: it is difficult to not recall Mridula Garg's injunction to authors to not venture into retrospectives of their lives without having lived it some years.

Yet, *Goner* is a striking piece of art. Not because it tells an extraordinary story or because it attempts to birth a new narrative paradigm, but simply because it tells its tale—broken, hurt, resilient—with startling honesty and passion. Amna's achievement in this book appears to lie precisely in this, that at first glance *Goner* seems to merit all of this unsavoury comment. It is only on deeper inspection, and introspection, that one realises that the book's excessively confused and agitated cogitation is a carefully wrought uncovering of what passes so commonly and pervasively as the normal. It is to Amna's credit that she does so in a way which is as engaging as it is impelling.

Consider, for instance, that shibboleth of language. The tone and choice of words in *Goner* will appear crude and unbecoming to many, and some may well be so dismayed as to not even bother seeing the narrative to its conclusion. Yet, this is the kind of language many of us actually speak in private—to friends, to even family, but most importantly to ourselves. Amna's interiorised monologue appears all the more credible for capturing this flavour of the casually, irreverently profane:

Oh, man, my head is spinning. I'm drunk. Again. And I'm high on some other shit as well. I don't know what they're calling it these days. Snuff? Brown Sugar? Cheap rip-off of cocaine? I don't know man! All I know is that it was powdery. I'm high as fuck. And not the good type. The bad type. The very very bad type. The terrible type. Whoa, this is a bad trip. (Amna 97)

Seen in light of Amna's unwaveringly level-headed exploration of mental health issues, this vividly intimate tone of confession— more grudging than willing—appears to be no mean artistic feat. She relates the frustration of experiencing a panic attack with a raw brazenness that perhaps can come only from having such pain as a daily companion. Those who have ever been through a panic attack will find it commendable that she is able to articulate not just its onset but also her thoughts and actions she as she wrestles against it and the spiral of her thoughts as she succumbs to it:

I had driven only a few miles when I felt an unwelcome jerk go through my body at first, and then through my stomach all the way up my throat, as though I was going to throw up...Breathe in, breathe out. It was more like wheezing. So wheeze in, wheeze out...I'm sobbing. I'm screaming. From afar, it's a manic sight. You can see a girl sitting in a car rocking to and fro, hands clenched into fists, punching the steering wheel till her knuckles bleed.

(Amna 48)

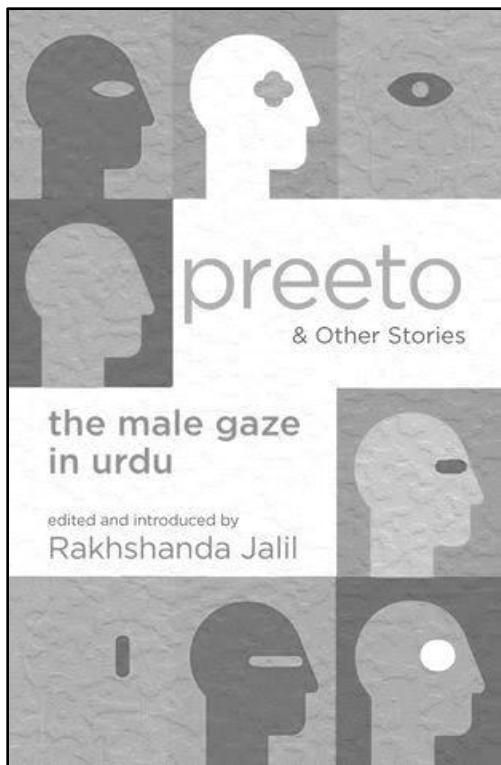
It is difficult at even the best of times for most of us to face our vulnerabilities and address them openly and frankly, for we are all habituated to brushing our anxieties, small and big, under that carpet of normalcy which we tend to obsessively uphold to our collective detriment. At a time when mental health is in the danger of becoming a fashionable buzzword, Amna is able to plumb into the depths of the anguish and torment of what anxiety actually entails—what it feels like, what it does. Welcome departures from the maudlin embellishments of celebrity culture which often obfuscate the nuanced gravity of the key issues at stake, this clarity and passion make *Goner* an onerous achievement.

**preeto**  
& Other Stories

**the male gaze  
in urdu**

edited and introduced by  
**Rakhshanda Jalil**

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## **BOOK REVIEW : PREETO AND OTHER STORIES**

**Harshit Nigam**

After an attempt to explore how women represent women in the Urdu literary world through her anthology *Neither Night Nor Day* (2007, Harper Collins), Rakhshanda Jalil now intends to invigorate how the male writers view and concomitantly represent women within the realm of Urdu short fiction via *preeto and Other Stories: the male gaze in urdu* (2018, Niyogi Books). This compendium of thirteen short stories by the male writers in Urdu language, challenges the reductionist ‘male gaze’ that essentializes the woman as the ‘Other’, and constructs her either as the fetish to be revered or the sexual commodity to be gazed at for voyeurism. The meticulous selection by Jalil, penned by stalwarts such as Rajinder Singh Bedi, Gulzar, Baig Ehsas, Deepak

Budki, Siddique Alamand several others, registers an altogether destabilizing and deconstructive approach to the ornamental and the fictionalised representations of women that have been the hallmarks of the Urdu fiction until the late nineteenth century. The Urdu stories translated and compiled for the volume etch their women protagonists as the ‘subjects’ to be explored rather than the sheer objects. In several stories, the readers will encounter women having an agency of their own, and articulating this agency as a tool for self-expression, empowerment, emancipation, and eventually to overthrow the authority of men in their lives.

In the title story “Preeto” by Krishan Chandar, the protagonist exercises her choice to make love to a man outside marriage under the charade of performing all her duties ordained by domesticity and conjugalit, and is quick and valiant enough to unleash her fury over her husband, the moment she realizes that he had killed her lover, the husband to whom she was in servitude for years, oblivious of the dark and the hidden truth. The protagonist of “Woman” by Rajinder Singh Bedi undermines the compliance expected out of her as a wife, and articulates the agency of a mother, all equipped to shower without any conditions, warmth and love over her partly paralysed child. The eponymous heroine of Faiyaz Riffat’s “Shonali”, a young maid servant despite being a constant preoccupation of the lecherous ‘male gaze’ of her employer is able to exercise almost a maternal authority over the ailing old man, and is resolute to discover her missing soul mate sister while enduring the drudgery of life, amidst the hustle and the bustle of the metropolis. Tasneem in Rahman Abbas’s “Asexual” is ready to be a man’s companion but nothing beyond that, well that’s her choice, so to speak. Bibi Izzat-un Nisa in “The Unexpected Disaster” by Hussainul Haque has every right to search for, and articulate love and compassion beyond her stale married life.

The protagonists who are unable to articulate their choices due to the restraints of ingrained patriarchy do have their ‘moment of dissensus’. Gulzar’s “Man” well interprets that a woman is always bound to answer men; father, husband, or eventually the son. However, Rama is brave and bold enough to love another man, Raman Kumar when her husband turns infidel, although answerable to her own son while carrying her lover’s child in the womb. In Baig Ehsas’s “The Heavy Stone”, the independent modern working woman being an unwedded mother has to abort her child, and is yet audacious enough to make a suggestion of hysterectomy rather than abortion, a crushing blow to her lover’s chauvinist male ego, so to speak. In Deepak Budki’s “Driftwood”, Suman a victim of sexual abuse in childhood turns into a wayward adult and starts using her body as a weapon to smoothen her life. Suman’s wounded psyche and physicality turns into an ‘analogy of resistance’. Zamiruddin Ahmad’s “A Bit Odd” offers a trivial gaze at the notions of honour and dignity, intrinsically ingrained to the patriarchal universe. In “The Ash in the Fire” by Abdus Samad, the young and the penniless protagonist, although doomed to nurse a living corpse is yet capable to raise serious questions about her identity, and the essence of a female being. In

Ratan Singh's "The Wedding Night" a nubile lady gardener is duped by the Sun-God after being enamoured of her beauty. The tale is highly allegorical where the lady gardener's decision to impart the flowers to her husband on the wedding night stands for her sublime and spiritual love. "Awaiting the Zephyr" by Syed Muhammad Ashraf again poses serious questions on the notions of youth and beauty intertwined with the feminine being. The elements of magic realism and the mysterious woman in Siddique Alam's "The Well of Serpents" too have much to say, figuratively about the pain and the suffering of women.

While the cover page of the anthology deliberately spells 'preeto', a proper noun with a small 'p' to suggest the commonality embedded beneath the ontological being of women, the selections in the text do acknowledge the intersectionalities of class, caste, geography, age, and capital to reveal how diverse could be the experiences of women ranging from rural to urban context, aristocracy to fishing community, banking and corporate sector to modelling world, and college-going student to middle-aged housewife. The short and the crisp introduction by the editor set the ground to explore and scrutinize the 'male gaze' in the hand-picked short stories. The editor introduces the reader to the concept of 'male gaze' as developed by Laura Mulvey, feminist and film critic; its loose or colloquial connotations, and suggests how the stories selected by her challenge the 'male gaze'. For the purpose, she briefly introduces the world of Urdu literature and culture and the way it represents women.

The ten different translators for the thirteen Urdu pieces (the title story, "Preeto" along with the two other stories translated by the editor, Rakhsanda Jalil) have tried their best possible to condite the stories with the authentic aroma of Urdu language by retaining some of the original Urdu words and expressions from the source text into the translated text. A short glossary provided by the editor at the end would be a boon for the readers unfamiliar to the universe of Urdu language and culture. The brief bio-notes on contributors and their translators well acquaint them to the readers, those encountering them for the first time. The black and white silhouettes and illustrations preceding each and every short story generate the interests of the readers in the narratives, and also aim at sort of 'haptic visuality', visuality that the readers may apprise and experience.

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## **DECLARATION(S)**

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The above declaration is true to the best of our knowledge.

- *Editors*