

NO. 41 (SPRING), 2023

dialog



Editor: Prof. Akshaya Kumar

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND CULTURAL STUDIES
PANJAB UNIVERSITY, CHANDIGARH

***dialog*, No. 41 (Spring, 2023)**

ISSN: 0975-4881

Editor: Prof. Akshaya Kumar

Editorial Board

Prof. Deepti Gupta

Dr. Meenu Gupta

Advisory Board

Prof. GJV Prasad

Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi

Prof. Nilanjana Gupta

Jadavpur University, Jadavpur

Prof. Meena Pillai

University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram

Prof Raj Kumar

Delhi University, Delhi

Prof. Mini Chandran

Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur

Prof. M. Asaduddin

Jamia Milia Islamia, Delhi

Prof. Anup Beniwal

GGS IP University, Delhi

Prof. Imtiaz Hasnain

Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh

Prof. Shelley Walia

Panjab University, Chandigarh

Prof. Pushpinder Syal

Panjab University, Chandigarh

Editorial Assistants:

Dr. Gaurav Kalra (Asst. Professor, Govt. Home Science College, Sector 10, Chandigarh)

Dr. Jaidev Bishnoi (Research Scholar, Dept. of English & Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh)

Dr. Shreesha Udupa (Associate Professor, School of Languages and Literature, Nalanda University)

Ms. Sanyogita (Research Scholar, Dept. of English & Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh)

Cover: by Martin Martz at Unplash

All inquiries pertaining to *dialog* should be addressed to: editordialog@pu.ac.in

Website: <http://dialog.puchd.ac.in>

Subscription Fee:

Institutions: INR 1200 (\$45) yearly or INR 3000 (\$120) for three years

Individuals: INR 1500 (\$75) yearly or INR 4000 (\$150) for three years

Cheques/Demand Drafts can be sent to: The Chairperson, Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh (India) – 160014

No. 41

SPRING 2023

CONTENTS

Editorial

Excitements of Intellectual In-disciplinarity

Akshaya Kumar

v-xi

Interviews

In Conversation with Arundhathi Subramaniam

1-25

In Conversation with Amlanjyoti Goswami

26-49

In Conversation with Kiriti Sengupta

50-62

Translations

**The First Eight *Saloks* of Sheikh Fareed
in English Translation**

Gurdeep Singh

63-70

He was a Good Man

Kinshuk Gupta

(Translated by Manika Arora)

71-95

Research Papers

**Music Within the Temple Precincts: Harivallabh
Sangeet Sammelan and Laxmi Narayan Raag
Sabha**

Naresh Kumar

96-119

**Introducing the Spectacle of Monomania in
Satyajit Ray's *Two*: A Play of the Infectious
Capital**

Richik Banerjee, Madhurima Mukhopadhyay	120-132
Reflection of Lord Modonmohan on the People of Bishnupur Ramyajit Sarkar	133-145
The Theme of Friendship in the <i>Hitopadesa</i> Richa Joshi Pandey	146-162
Notes on Human Epoch: Sudeep Sen's <i>Anthropocene</i> Tom Phillips	163-178
'The Creature' of Modern Frankenstein: An Exploration of Representation of Plastic Consciousness in Children's Literature Dr Sumneet Kaur and Dr Chitwan	179-196
Legacies That Survive Across Time and Space: A Critical Reading of the "Trickster" Character Anansi from West African Folklore Sarita G	197-210
Memories, Metaphors, and Maladies in War and Partition: Revisiting Three Films from India and Bangladesh Sreetanwi Chakraborty	211-222
The Politics of (Un)Belonging: Critiquing Select Short Fictions by Janice Pariat Dustin Lalkulhpuia, Thongam Dhanajit Singh	223-235
Understanding the Dalit Hero/Anti-hero: A Comparative Analysis of Manu Joseph's <i>Serious Men</i> and Ajay Navaria's "Scream" Maitrayee Sarma	236-247
Food Politics and Culinary Capital: A Critical Reading of Easterine Kire's <i>A Terrible</i>	

<i>Matriarchy and Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's "They Eat Meat"</i>	
Saru Sachdeva and Rekha Rani	248-264
<i>De-aestheticising Animal Cruelty: A Critical Study of Aravind Malagatti's Government Brahmana</i>	
Pooja Duggal	265-278
<i>Manhood in Crisis: A Reading of Gender Fluidity in Nuruddin Farah's Maps</i>	
Sehnaz Rofique Saikia	279-294
<i>Lesbian Poetics of Intimacy: A Study of Homoeroticism and Sexual Subjectivity on Instagram</i>	
Ishani Saha	295-312
<i>"The Death of the Author" and Schism within Postmodern Feminism: A Revision</i>	
Debdas Roy	313-327
<i>Semiotics of Gender: The Construction of a Lie</i>	
Ujjal Jeet	328-341
Book Reviews	
<i>Arundhathi Subramaniam. Women Who Wear Only Themselves. Speaking Tiger, India, 2021</i>	
N. Safrine	342-344
<i>Neha Bansal. Herstory, Sahitya Akademi, 2022</i>	
Seema Jain	345-348
<i>Maninder Sidhu. Nayantara Sahgal: A Century of Political Insights. Routledge, 2023</i>	
Manjit Inder Singh	349-353

**Sudeep Sen. *RED*. Nirox Foundation, South
Africa, 2023**
Kamaldeep Kaur

354-360

Poems

Kindness
Ranjiet

361-363

Contributors



Editorial

Excitements of Intellectual In-disciplinarity

Akshaya Kumar*

On the face of it, the present issue of *dialog* is an assortment of unrelated papers, interviews and reviews *sans* any overarching regular architecture. This open-endedness is deliberate and intentional. English Studies in India is on the cusp of cultural explosion, and its eclecticism is multiplying. If in 1960s the invasion of theory emanating from the metropolitan academia of West provided much needed expansiveness to the discipline, in post-1990s the unease with excessive intellectualization of the discipline once again demanded the return of experience and emotion back on the 'literary' landscape. The scene is both exciting and intimidating. Those who are too much disciplinary in their training find it difficult to harness their experiences for the purposes of research. So, the hiatus between experience and research continues. There are others who now have gathered the courage to go eclectic, and audaciously inter-disciplinary. This issue of the journal attempts to showcase the talent of the latter category of 'eclectic' researchers. Whether this eclecticism fructifies into some legible research or is just a smokescreen for in-disciplinarity is to be assessed by each reader at his/her own end. But it is time that research is given a freedom—freedom of going unclassified. There is no point in 'applying theory,' and rehearsing its categories *ad nauseum*. Research needs to be rescued from 'mechanical re-production.'

The first section of the issue opens with free-wheeling conversations with three poets—Arundhati Subramaniam, Amlanjyoti Goswami, and Kiriti Sengupta conducted on-stage in the presence of students and other poetry-*sahridyas* on three different dates. The exciting 'return of poetry' to the Department in itself heralds a relief from the

* Professor, Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh

over-presence of theory which has steamrolled departments of literatures all across the globe into paper-producing machines. Arundhati in her interactions covers the trajectory of her poetic journey from her first collection *On Cleaning Bookshelves* to her latest non-fictional work *Women Who Only Wear Themselves*. The conversation with Arundhati centers around the dominance of *bhakti* in her poetry and the possible emergence of *shakti*-school of poetry within the scope of Indian English poetry. Amlanjyoti opens up about his strategy of remaining relatively insular from the influences so as to exercise poetic freedom without any anxiety. Kiriti Sengupta defends his minimalist style of poetry, and goes on to suggest that his innate Bengali sensibility feeds his English poems.

As we step into the age of comparative Indian literature, translation of Indian language literature becomes the natural mandate of departments of English studies. The translations of first eight *salokas* of Sheikh Baba Fareed from *Shri Guru Granth Sahib* by a scholar Gurdeep Singh add a typical native Punjabi touch to the issue. Both the original verses in Gurumukhi and their translations in English have been given side-by-side for the connoisseurs and the critics to cross-check the veracity of the effort. The highlight of the issue is a short story, “He was a Good Man,” written by an emerging short-story writer and a poet Kinshuk Gupta. The story has been translated by Manika Arora with able assistance from Anjali Deshpande. The platitudes or the protocols of heteronormative familial structure often come in conflict with the unqualified love that the queer protagonist clamours to celebrate. The story covers the journey of the protagonist from his inhibition to accept his attraction for the same-sex, to finally his renouncing the prospect of social acceptance of such a love in a social set-up that is full of lies and cover-ups. The story critiques the death of the grandfather—the custodian of heteronormative values, and the entire spectacle of his last rites from a perspective which is new and ever radical to Hindi story.

A major section of the issue is devoted to diverse research papers, and these papers collectively offer us a wide range of critical spectrum. The first paper by Naresh Kumar on music festivals inside two temple precincts—*Devi Talab Mandir* (Jalandhar) and *Durgiana Mandir* (Amritsar)—opens up debates on the secular and sacred play

of registers within the experience of everyday culture. As these Hindu temples host singers of *ghazals* and *qawwalis* along with the singers of classical singers, the default syncretic and pluralistic nature of the festivals undergoes change. The paper ends on a compelling question whether ‘temple publics’ and ‘music publics’ overlap or they form two distinct spheres. The second paper offers a critique of the modern world, particularly the aggression of its excess capital through a close study of Satyajit Ray’s film *Two: A Film Fable*. The obsession of the ‘rich’ kid with plastic toys represents the reification of class, wealth and masculinity; the loose unhoused ‘poor’ kid, situated voluntarily as he is from the plastic capital, bears a more harmonious ecosophic relationship with his surroundings. Sumneet and Chitwan’s paper too brings in the issue of ‘ecological wounding’ due to the excessive presence of plastic in the environment. Tom Philips’s paper on Sudeep Sen’s poetry-collection *Anthropocene* extends the frontiers of cosmopolitanism as it calls for a consciousness of planetarity in the wake of cataclysmic changes in the climate.

The anthropological folkloric studies now lapse into Cultural Studies, and the boundaries between the disciplines are indeed blurring. The paper on Lord Modanmohan, the tutelary deity of Malla dynasty of Bishnupur is descriptive, but it foregrounds the impact of local icons have on culture of the region. Ramyajit Sarkar maps out the impact of this deity on food-habits, dress-codes and war-techniques of the people of Bishnupur. Sarita G’s paper undertakes a survey of African folk tales of Ashanti, an ethnolinguistic group from Ghana, with a special focus on Anasi, a trickster character. Anasi folktales are animal tales that mock at human follies. Dustin Lalkulhpua and Thongam Dhanajit take us to the complex dynamics of belonging and unbelonging in North-East of India through a nuanced reading of short fiction of Janice Pariat. Contesting the notions of pure ethnic identities, Pariat’s works represent the essential nature of hybridized co-existence. There are two papers on Dalit texts. Pooja Duggal’s paper focuses on Aravind Malagatti’s Dalit autobiography, *Government Brahmana*, which challenges the conventional norms of representing animal cruelty by de-aestheticizing it. The paper further examines the agency and subjectivity attributed to animals in Malagatti’s narrative, emphasizing the need to recognize animals as active agents. Maitrayee Sarma undertakes a comparative analysis of

Manu Joseph's *Serious Men* and Ajay Navaria's "Scream" to foreground the close proximity of modernist anti-hero with Dalit hero.

Richa Joshi Pandey's paper draws our attention to the ethical issues of friendship and diplomacy as spelled out in *Hitopadesha*. The fabular text written around 800 CE provides a rich taxonomy of varieties of friendship within the framework of *niti* and *dharma*. The author of the paper lends a thicker texture to her writing by invoking references from *Arthashastra* and *Manusmriti*. The paper gains importance in the context of debates of cosmopolitanism and friendship given by western theorists from Derrida to Agamben. Through a textual analysis of Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy*, and Hansda Sowendra Shekhar's "They Eat Meat", Rekha Rani and Saru Sachdeva in their paper emphasize upon the role of food as a symbol of social community and mutual obligations. Food is examined through the lens of Paul du Gay's "circuit of culture," encompassing representations, identity, production, consumption, and regulation. Furthermore, the paper discusses how fear and discrimination are used to shape food choices and behaviours, leading to cultural assimilation and the suppression of indigenous food practices.

Sehnaz Rofique Saikia's paper delves into the intricate theme of identity, particularly the protagonist Askar's quest for a stable sexual and national identity within a postmodern narrative framework through a critical reading of Nuruddin Farah's novel *Maps*. *Maps* challenges essentialist notions of identity by highlighting the fluidity and uncertainty inherent in the postcolonial Somali context. The narrative exposes the impossibility of a stable national or ethnic identity due to historical and colonial complexities. If Saikia's paper foregrounds the crisis of manhood, Ishani Saha's paper highlights the marginalization of female homoeroticism due to societal prohibitions, leading to a lack of discourse and visibility. It then traces the evolution of visual representation, from classical art to modern digital platforms, emphasizing the role of female photographers like Nancy Goldin and Judy Francesconi in reclaiming lesbian subjectivity. The analysis is divided into two categories of Instagram posts: those less sexually explicit and those more sexually

explicit. The less explicit category emphasizes touch, rewriting castration, and redefining the lack of the female body. The more explicit category explores the erogenous zones of the female body, the body as a political weapon against societal norms, and the dissolution of binary distinctions in intimate relationships.

The last two 'theoretical' papers show the continual presence of literary theory in academia. Debdas Roy examines Roland Barthes' assertion of the "death of the author," as he argues that the of subjectivity of experience of authors, particularly women, is essential in decoding their works. The schism within postmodern feminism arises from the tension between celebrating female authorship and deconstructing authorial authority, reflecting the complex interplay between feminism and poststructuralist thought. Ujjal Jeet's paper dissects differing explanations for the perpetuation of gender roles, including the political view of gender oppression within capitalist systems, the impact of agricultural technology on patriarchy, and the significance of sexual relations. The construction of two myths, namely the seductress and the good mother, is examined as pivotal instruments in denigrating and controlling women's reproductive power, reinforcing patriarchal ideals. These myths serve to maintain male dominance and symbolize the association of masculinity with power, further complicating women's quest for equality.

The interviews, the papers and book reviews included in this issue thus cover a proliferating range of themes and concerns, orientations and perspectives, revealing the innate democratic and pluralistic character of English Studies in India now. While the emerging scenario is promising, it is also challenging to take onboard the multiplicities of discourses within the institutionalized framework of the discipline under a growing environment of control and quantification.

Before I close down my write-up, I am obliged to mention the loss that the world of literature has suffered in the past few days. The city lost two of its most illustrious Hindi writers and critics—Virendra Mehndiratta and Ramesh Kuntal Megh. The former used to host a mini literary conclave for decades from his house under the name

‘Abhivyakti’, and there was hardly a writer of city who could afford to miss its monthly meetings. Personally, I attended many of its meetings and interacted with writers of all the three-four languages of the city. Megh taught at many universities in the region and the US also. Author of many critically very rigorous works, he was awarded Sahitya Akademi award for his work *Vishamithaksaritsagar* in 2017. The Department had invited him to speak on Nirmal Verma some years ago. The death of leading Indian poet Jayanata Mahapatra is no less disturbing. He, along with Ezekiel and Ramanujan created an audience for Indian English poetry in India—which now is booming with the arrival of a whole lot of young poets. Sudeep Sen who compiles *Converse*—an anthology of poems to mark the 75th years of India’s independence, acknowledges Mahapatra as his guru and mentor. I too had many interactions with the stalwart poet. I am sharing one his letters that he wrote to me in the year 2002 when I sent him my essay on A.K. Ramanujan’s poetry “Time as Poetry” for publication in *Chandrabhaga*.

Lastly, some acknowledgments are must. The Department is grateful to scholars from all over India for their contributions in the form of papers and book reviews. We are also thankful to our team of reviewers who responded to our requests within given time frame. I am thankful to other members of the Editorial Board and Advisory Board for their encouragement and constant suggestions and feedback. The publication of an issue of this magnitude at the end of the day is collective task, and the role of editorial assistants is very significant. I am particularly thankful to Sanyogita and Gaurav Kalra for their hard work and their sense of dutifulness. The manager of the press Mr. Jitender Moudgil, the typesetter Shubham and the office staff of the Department of English and Cultural Studies have done their best to see the timely publication of *dialog* (41).

Letter from Jayanata Mahapatra

Trivenia Bagicha, Cuttack 753 001, Orissa [Tel: 0671-617434]
July 1, 2002 P.S. I don't have email!

Dear Akshaya

May I call you so? Please do address me any way you like - plain 'Jayanata' would be fine. These things really don't matter; but please don't use the 'ji'. I am at ease with younger people, and like to forget I'll be 74 soon!

We will be delighted to use your Ramanujan essay in the Summer 2003 issue of *Q*. We have finalised eps for the forthcoming issue (Winter 2002), and this is keeping me somewhat occupied. But in the essay - is the line "In Ramanujan poetry, time . . . consciousness" (P 17, last lines) right? Kindly confirm.

Time has always been of concern to people everywhere. My hero and guru is Einstein, and his eyes stare up at me from a photograph on my desk. I wrote an essay on time in relation to my poetry some time back. If you'd like to see it, I'll send a xerox to you.

But I do enclose a "poem" I wrote on Ramanujan when I heard of his death - just to share it with you.

Maybe you know best whom you could pit Ramanujan against - both language poets and contemporaries? We'll talk this over sometime if you are still interested.

I am sending by separate post the current issue of *Q*. Do let me know what I can do to improve the magazine.

And, thank you again for your Ramanujan piece. Best wishes.

Sincerely, Jayanata



In Conversation with Arundhathi Subramaniam

(This is an edited version of an on-stage conversation with well-known poet, biographer and editor Arundhathi Subramaniam on 29 March 2023 in Mulk Raj Anand Auditorium of the Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh)

Akshaya Kumar: I have been reading your poems for the last twenty years now. Your poetic energies are inexhaustible. Whenever I read your poems, I feel that you have already attained a poetic crescendo, and that it would be difficult for you to exceed yourself, but with each new collection, you bounce back with greater energy and vigour. Let me begin the conversation with your first collection – *On Cleaning Bookshelves*, which I read long back. The title of the collection looks very ordinary. Cleaning shelves is a routine domestic drudgery. But in the collection, it becomes a trope of dismantling all structures of knowledge. Shelves become the site of happening. In the title poem of the collection, different writers from all across the continents and of different generations, who are otherwise stacked in different almirahts, begin to talk to each other. They enter into conversational intimacies. In this first collection what really startles me, is your degree of unrest. You come across as a poet who carries within her body, within herself, an enormous rage. So, words as they occur on the blank page, don't just land on the page easily. The words "stab ... the white autocracy of silence." Every poem bears the burden of legendary past and its mythical heroines from Kali to Kannagi—all known for their all-devouring rage. In "Andheri Local" a women's compartment turns into "A thousand-limbed/ million-tongued multi-spoused Kali on wheels". In another poem "Madurai", after caricaturizing an orthodox Punditji, you remind him of your fiery descentance: ". . . /that I am descended/ from an ancient tribe of women/ capable of damning entire/ Madurais/ its eternal infernos/ with a sorcery/ born not of virtue/ but of rage." This is re-living Kannagi in modern times. It is very easy to lapse into rage, but very difficult to orchestrate and harness that rage into legible poetry. So, we'll go along and read some poems from latter collections as well.

So, Arundhati let me begin with this ordinary question: is there a post-life to rage?

Arundhati Subramaniam: First, let me just drink in this moment. I am reconnecting with several people here who are familiar for various reasons, so that makes this session special.

Thank you for these observations, Akshaya. Sitting here with you today in this postprandial session, recovering from lunch, and thinking about a whole body of poetry, is a journey in itself. And your observations are, for me, a way of reconnecting with aspects of a journey that can sometimes seem like it happened a long time ago.

I am particularly glad that you began with the first book. Not many people have even access to this collection anymore, because it is out of print. No copies exist as far as I know, other than those that were procured at that time in 2001.

It was probably the year 1999 when some young journalist asked me how I saw poetry. I remember saying it's a kind of 'disciplined savagery'. So, it is interesting that you asked me this question about rage, because it actually takes me back to that moment. And since then I probably have come to a point when ... well, I have certainly not transcended rage, but I do have a line in my recent book that speaks of those who have learnt 'the tricks to turn rage into celebration.' There is a trick, and I don't know how many of you here want to learn that trick! For me, it took me decades, and I am not sure I am there yet. I trip up and I forget my tricks every now and then.

But I would say two things. For one, making poems is a chemical process. Just think of the times we've all sat down and written out our anger on the page of a diary. It doesn't have to be a poem; it could just be a daily journal. But one invariably finds that by the time one has reached the end of the page, that rage has, in some subtle way, been transformed. Each of you knows this, right? You can sit down and write out your anger, but by the time you turn the page, something has changed. And I think that chemical transformation is thanks to the alchemy inherent in the writing process. So, perhaps

that had something to do, Akshaya, with the way my rage was transformed or inflected over time.

But I'm not sure that's the complete answer. I think what changed was also my own life journey. A spiritual practice changed the way I breathed, and that changed the way I inhabited myself, and that changed the way I inhabited the page, I think. So, I think what is important to me today in poetry, apart from precision and authenticity, is intensity. There is no writing for me worth its salt without intensity. I was saying this just yesterday: a lukewarm piece of writing has no reason to exist. You can do it for yourself, and I do plenty of it for myself, but I don't necessarily want to share it until it has a certain voltage. That voltage is the reason for a poem's existence.

It took me time to realize that that voltage did not have to come from anger. And that voltage didn't have to have a name. I didn't have to call it rage, and I didn't have to call it passion, and I didn't have to call it love. It was just intensity. So, I'd say that what interests me today, Akshaya, is voltage *with* subtlety. Not losing sight of subtlety, but never compromising on that energetic mainspring. That's the aspiration.

AK: I have also tried to map the journey of your rage through other poems, other collections thereafter. The intensity is perpetually there, but when I read your *Where I Live*, your rage turns more sober, and you become reflective. You are more into ambivalences or existential dilemmas. This is not to say the rage is compromised, but perhaps this is the next level of what you call 'disciplined savagery'. For instance, in *Where I Live*, the poem that immediately comes to your mind is "Home." Now this is a very ambivalent take on the idea of home, because we think home is a black hole that sucks you up, and we sometimes feel very safe in the environment of a home. But you seek a home that does not really put any demand on you. So, let me read this poem.

Give me a home
that isn't mine,
where I can slip in and out of rooms

without a trace,
never worrying
about the plumbing,
the colour of the curtains,
the cacophony of books by the bedside.

A home that I can wear lightly,
where the rooms aren't clogged
with yesterday's conversations,
where the self doesn't bloat
to fill in the crevices.

A home, like this body,
so alien when I try to belong,
so hospitable
when I decide I'm just visiting.

So, when I read this latter collection *Where I Live*, collection where you have undergone some new experiences obviously, your rage acquires necessary complexity. There is a poem you write about Madras, and you say that the city holds you and also doesn't hold you at the same time. The exact lines are:

City that creeps up on me
just when I'm about to affirm
world citizenship

So, this tense ambivalence which you register here in this collection, for me is the next stage of transformation that your rage sometimes naturally takes. You seek almost a planetary expansion. So, how do you relate this new-found ambivalence to the rage that you now seem to have channelized into more inward reflection. Or should I say that have forgotten your rage, altogether?

AS: Not forgotten, I promise you. Very much there.

When I look back on the first of my five books of poetry, *On Cleaning Bookshelves*. I sometimes think that all the elements that are important to me today, were already there in their most nascent form.

The seeds were already there. It helps me to go back and look at it, because it's so easy to forget who you were, you know? It is so to create a narrative about who you were three decades ago. I realized that book is still pretty much me. Even in that book, the notion of home, or of belonging, was complex.

I realize I was writing even then about relationships, I was writing about cities, I was writing about gender politics, myths, journeys. But *how* I was writing about them was different. With my second book, *Where I Live*, that preoccupation intensified. There were clearly personal and cultural reasons why I started to feel the need to address the gap: the gap between where I live and where I belong. And there was a deepening spiritual need to address those questions. Where do I belong? Who am I, or where am I from? Where is my home? All those age-old questions. How do I bridge the gap between where I live and where I belong—personally, culturally, politically, but also existentially? I think those questions were there in the first book, but they took on an urgency now.

So, there is a long rage poem (since we are discussing rage) addressed to a Welsh critic, “To the Welsh Critic Who Doesn’t Find Me Identifiably Indian,” in *Where I Live*, which is actually saying, “I have my own indefinable way, my own complex way of being myself. I would like to be subtle about it. I would like to be quietly celebratory of this ambiguity. But if you appoint yourself cultural gatekeeper and presume to tell me how to be Indian, maybe I will have to be assertive, and tell you that I will *not* pander to your definition. I may not be able to define my Indianness, but I will not allow your definition to be the last word on me either.”

So, there is that kind of rage in the second book, too. We belong to places in very, very contrary ways, don’t we? There are moments we belong, and moments we don’t. In my first book, for instance, there is a poem, “Winter, Delhi, 1997,” that talks about being with my grandparents, which is as uncomplicated a state of belonging as it can get. And yet, the same poem speaks of a conversation about what it means to be Hindu with a grandfather who might have his own definition of it. The poem speaks of the impulse to gently infuriate

him by talking about a romance with a Pakistani cricketer! So, there is deep affection, as well dissent.

I think there has always been a fascination with the gloriously muddy ways in which we are ourselves. And a refusal to iron out that messy, complicated belonging just to make life easier for a beloved grandfather, or a much less beloved Welsh critic, or for anyone else.

In the later books, that is distilled into a certain passion or intensity, but perhaps it is less reactive. In “A Song to Catabolic Women” in the recent book (*Love Without a Story*), the speaker seems to have found a way to turn a rant into an anthem. Let me quote some excerpts:

We’re coming apart,
we’re going downhill,
the fury’s almost done,
we’ve had our fill.

We’re passionate, ironic
angelic, demonic,
clairvoyant, rational
wildly Indian, anti-national.

We’re not trying to make our peace
not itching for a fight,
we don’t need your shade
and we don’t need your light.

We know charisma isn’t contagious
and most rules are egregious.

We’re catabolic women.

We’ve known the refuge of human arms,
the comfort of bathroom floors,
we’ve stormed out of rooms,
thrown open the doors.

We've figured the tricks to turn rage
into celebration,
we know why the oldest god dances
at every cremation....

We're not interested in camouflage
or self-revelation,
not looking for a bargain
or an invitation.

We're capable of stillness
even as we gallivant,
capable of wisdom
even as we rant.

Look into our eyes,
you'll see we're almost through.
We can be kind but we're not really
thinking of you.

We don't remember names
and we don't do Sudoku.
We're losing EQ and IQ,
forgetting to say please and thank you.

We're catabolic women

We've never ticked the right boxes,
never filled out the form,
our dharma is tepid,
our politics lukewarm.

We've had enough of earnestness
and indignation
but still keep the faith
in conversation....

We're unbuilding now,
unperpetuating,

unfortifying,
disintegrating.

We're caterwauling,
catastrophic,
shambolic,
cataclysmic,
catabolic women.

So, there's still rage. But there is also more joy. And that gives the rage a certain buoyancy, perhaps.

AK: There is also one thing that consistently runs through your poetry. You write poems decade-wise. When you turn thirty, forty, then into fifty, you write poems to celebrate your journey around these temporal matrices. Why am I asking this question is that your rage increasingly turns into a kind of an intelligent whisper. For instance, I am reading this poem "By Thirty." I am not dramatizing 'thirty' as a marker of rupture, but certainly there is an ostensible shift. Let me recount some lines from the poem:

By thirty
the midriff thickens
to remind you
of the babies you never brought up, brought to
fruition.
Satori is a deferred project.

By thirty you begin to smell death
on dawn visits to bathroom...

By thirty
you can almost smile
at the treachery
of friends, lovers, schoolteachers.
Perhaps by forty
You'll will forgive them.

So, three-four things. One is, you begin to smell death, and now you

are talking in whispers, and third you are ready to forgive all those who were treacherous. So, what is this change of tone? From the fear of death to this whole idea of whispers and then that you are aware that there is a treachery all around you and then you are also forgiving?

AS: Well, it's based on the *hope* that maybe by forty I will forgive them. So, it is predicated on the future. I am well past forty now, but I'm not sure that future has arrived!

All lyric poetry is haunted by time, isn't it? I know the preoccupation with finiteness, with death, with temporality, has been consistent in my work. That might explain the poems you mention: 'By Thirty' in my first book, "Epigrams for Life After Forty" in *When God is a Traveller*, and "The End of the World" in *Love Without a Story*.

But looking at chronology here is interesting. My first book was published in 2001, when I was actually well into my thirties. (I was born in '67, so you can do the math.) The poems there were written through my twenties and through the early thirties, so it strikes me now as you read this poem that a personal turning point of 1997 had happened well before the book was even published. What happened in 1997 was a kind of death experience, a very intense encounter with silence. When I came out of that particular encounter, it was clear to me that I had to return to some of the old questions that had haunted me, but now with a certain urgency. I now became a conscious seeker.

So, by the time the first book was published, something had already shifted. That began to unfold in the second book in a very particular way. There was a deepening unease, which I think is very much a part of *Where I Live*. That unease plays itself out in a poem like 'Home'. But there is also an implicit insight that there is another way to belong. The poem starts with the line, "Give me a home that isn't mine." It takes me by surprise today, because it seems prescient. It anticipates certain directions that my life took, which felt, at one point, like exile, and later, like a much deeper homecoming. So, when I look at that poem (especially those lines, "A home, like this body, / so alien when I try to belong, / so hospitable when I decide / I'm just

visiting”) I guess was already a longing for a more authentic sense of self.

I was talking about the bhakti poets yesterday, and how they came to my rescue, when I desperately needed them. They were important to me, because they’d ‘been there, done that.’ (You know, you need to hear that sometimes. You need to know that others have walked this journey before you. That you’re not alone.) And reading them, I learnt there is no way to make this life journey without dropping down deep into the body and the heart. It is not a coincidence that the last section of *Where I Live* (in the international Bloodaxe Books version) is suffused with a kind of dark passion. There’s a visceral, erotic quality to those poems, a kind of sensual elation.

So, the preoccupation with death, with the life of the spirit, was there quite early. It was always alongside the rage. I guess I’m not the kind that knows how to ‘rage against the dying of the light’. Mine is more a poetry of the murmur, but hopefully a molten murmur—one that allows me to whisper, but never losing the impulse to scorch the page.

AK: You refer to your tryst with bhakti and bhakti poetry. Bhakti poets also traverse a difficult terrain in the sense that they were seekers and at the same time they were reformers, poets-as-activists. In your poetic cosmos verbs as markers of action operate in a conspicuous way. They carry the intensity of your rage and thirst. Obviously, nouns fail to express the seeker in you. But this gamut of thirst and rage and seeking in way determines the dominant drift of your poetic curve. I do not mean to say that you are predictable as a poet, but some of possible future directions and trajectories are well laid-out.

AS: Except that when you see yourself more as a verb than as a noun, you are much less predictable, even to yourself. So maybe you can anticipate the future directions I will take, I can’t.

All I know now, as a poet, is that my sense of belonging right now might lie in a deep sense of ease with a friend over a cup of orange chai in an Irani café. But tomorrow that sense of belonging might look very different.

I think the bhakti poets rescued me because they were not merely interested in worshipping the sacred. They were interested in *embodying* the divine. They wanted to make the sacred *crunchy*. They wanted to make the divine *thingy*. That is the essential quest of metaphor, isn't it? You are trying to capture the abstract in words, you are trying to give it texture, you are trying to give it form, you are trying to give it shape, you are trying to give it grain. You want to be able to touch, and smell, and taste the intangible. So, that need of the bhakti poets to embody the divine, dance the divine, sing the sacred, spoke deeply to me. It also resonated with my own nascent, still-unfolding understanding of yoga.

AK: One word which you used here, which is very important and which you use in your poetry also is "thinginess." You, in one of your poems, do talk about "the unstoppable garrulity of things." But in a latter collection, your emphasis then moves from verbs to adjectives. Let me draw your attention to your poem "Let Me be Adjective". Adjectives are facile cosmetic descriptions. Verbs are much more animate, much more kinetic, and action-oriented. How do you express this thinginess? Because when I read your poetry, I see accent on the verbs, but I was taken aback by this poem when you said that "I am describing, and for description I need adjectives."

AS: That's an interesting observation. I'm enjoying this conversation!

It's certainly not that I have decided to forego the verb in favour of the adjective. The verb is far too important, and will always be. Not just for the dynamism it brings to a poem. But also because it allows me to see myself as a practitioner of verse—a 'doing' person—rather than a Poet (with a capital P).

Let me try to make this as concrete as possible. When I grew up, I was a passionate viewer of Indian classical dance. And while I was fascinated, I also grew weary of the content. There was the *nayika*, the heroine, waiting endlessly for her beloved. This infuses our classical love poetry, in Tamil, in Sanskrit, and in every other Indian language. This pining woman seemed tiresome to me because of her

passivity. This woman would adorn herself, as she waited. There was a lot of *alankara*. She would braid her hair with fragrant jasmine, she would smear her body with sandal paste, she would look out of windows, hoping for this lover to turn up. The dancers always announced that this was not just a woman waiting for a man, that there was a deeper subtext at work. We were told this was actually the devotee waiting for her god, this was the human waiting for the Divine, this was the *jivatman* waiting for the *paramatman*.

Now this logic somehow did not appeal to me. As a young woman, I was impatient. I thought, why on earth can I not see a different kind of heroine? Why is her entire life predicated on the absence or presence of this male god? And then my own journey unfolded. And I began to see these sacred poets anew. In fact, they became much truer literary ancestors for me than I'd ever imagined. Why? Because these poets told me that waiting does not have to mean passivity. That waiting can be a kind of dynamic receptivity. A vibrant stillness.

So, the verb remains important. But my understanding of the verb has probably changed. A poem must have aliveness. But aliveness does not have to mean hectic movement. Aliveness can mean stillness. And that kind of stillness is far from lifeless. My challenge is how to smuggle that stillness into a poem.

I'm not sure I know how, but I keep trying, because that stillness is really the heart-centre of the poem. My own experience tells me that that stillness is the place from which all words emerge. The question is: how do I aspire to make that live in a poem?

So, I don't see myself as having given up the verb. I just see myself approaching the verb somewhat differently. In fact, the poem you mention, *Akshaya*, is actually full of verbs, although it is paradoxically titled, "Let Me Be Adjective":

And so, the verb is all.

But I'm not ready for it yet.

I tie knots

every now and then

to dam the flow,
to pretend

I am thing,
I am thing

and to pretend
you are too,

more thing than I,
worthier of being described.

And until the knots come undone
as one day they must

let me modify
qualify
anoint
counterpoint
apostrophise
parenthesise
invent
dissent
Let me take wing
let me sing

you.

I suppose I'm asking,
like the old bards did
to be your garland

not always tenderly floral

just a little tart,
a little contrary

the kind that isn't always allowed
within walled gardens

But even as I meander,
let my trail
be the thread
that completes the circle
I long to make around you

Love, let me be adjective.

AK: So, what I am trying in this conversation is that I am connecting the dots, how rage travels and how it takes different hues, and how the lexical changes, and how your age-growth maps also go along with that. And also, how you begin to then realize that things may manifest in number of ways. And if you are making God also a thing, God then becomes suddenly very playful, and very intimate, and very friendly, and your rival also, you never know. But, one word that, and this is a word one might trace its beginning in your earlier collections is 'conversation.' You are in a conversation, which now increasingly is available in every page. This conversation is a very enabling mechanism, so to say, because rage if channelized in a conversation, then it gives you a space of co-habiting, and then it also becomes a space of living life together. So, in your this recent book of non-fictional prose *Women Who Wear Only Themselves*, you literally enter into conversations with 'quiet' contemporary woman mystics who, as you put it, are "not spiritual celebrities," but who in their self-contained way are deep into spiritualism. So, this whole idea of conversation, and you say you converse with people who are often quiet, and quieter. Now, there are two possibilities. When you converse, you expand; other is you dissipate. How do you look at that?

AS: Well, let me say that I should be having conversations with you more often! It sets me thinking about the connections between my poetry and my prose. You're zeroing in on certain keywords that point me to some very pivotal experiences. That suggests a very comprehensive reading of the work at your end.

Did you say conversations can make one expand or dissipate? Well, yes, when I think of the poem from my first book that you mentioned, “Madurai,” I think of that unfortunate Pandit-ji “with a face about as medieval as nylon.” I guess that was a bit savage. Today, I hope I would have a different kind of conversation with him. I doubt I would ever agree with him, but I hope I would be less enraged by him.

So, from there to my most to my most recent book of poems, *Love Without a Story*, I guess what has shifted is my approach to conversation. The new poems are full of conversations with people of very different persuasions, in terms of faith, ideology, politics, life choices. There is a monk whom I meet on the road to Mount Kailash. There is a naked woman mystic whom I meet somewhere in the wilds outside Kancheepuram. (She also makes it into *Women Who Wear Only Themselves*, the book of prose that you mentioned.) There is a friend with whom I have had heated discussions as a student, in seminars and cafeterias, when we probably believed our dharma was to convert each other! I now say there is “no edge to our voices any more/ when we speak of Zen/ or Gramsci.”

Similarly, *Women Who Wear Only Themselves*, the book of essays, is about four contemporary, little-known women who are on spiritual journeys. Each one is very different from the other. One is on the path of bhakti. Another is on the path of tantra. One is more cerebral; another is more of an ecstatic *avadhuta*. One is a layperson; the other a monk. I am not trying to play advocate for any of them or their paths. I am simply saying, my life was enriched by listening to these diverse women. I am saying, my life is enriched by knowing they exist.

I suppose I have learnt that you can love people without necessarily agreeing with them. And even if you don’t love them as intimate friends, you can still include them in your gaze, and not seek to erase or cancel them. I learnt that from personal experience. But I also learnt it from the bhakti poets who taught me that dissent and affection can go together. These poets argue with their gods, but they never stop loving them.

If you try to critique something from a place of contempt or derision, it is never going to change or respond positively to you, because you are already looking at it as the 'Other.' The *bhakti* poets, in their finest poems, never speak to their god as a frozen Other. There is always the implicit assumption that this seeming Other and the self are going to unite. That union is a matter of time. That faith infuses all their poetry. This god might be unpunctual. This god might be elusive. This god might be whimsical, or contrary. Or even unjust. But, there is really no divide. The self and the sacred are part of the same continuum. If you include another in your gaze, in your heart, rather than try to chop them off, something begins to shift.

Conversations can be about disagreement, about long silences, about pauses. But they still spell connection. That's important to me. So, to answer your question, I'd say yes, the new poems keep the faith in the importance of dialogue.

AK: And there is a full poem in praise of conversations, and you write a long poem on conversations, but I am reading just three-four lines from the poem:

The ones that meander into truth
The ones that lie in parentheses
The ones that lie

Meanderings and conversations are analogical. Even God in your poetry remains a traveller. Let me also quote two incantatory lines from "God is a Traveller" which always ring in my mind:

Trust him
whose race is run,
whose journey remains.

Is God still in the state of becoming?

AS: Yes, because that god needs to be embodied every single day, every single moment. That's the challenge. That's a journey. And the same poem says:

Trust him
who recognizes you –
auspicious, abundant, battle-scarred,
alive –

That's the god who is willing to circle the world all over again just to see it through your eyes. That god has to be recovered every single day, because if the divine has to look out through your eyes you need to do a fair amount of cleansing of your vision. So, if you ask me, personally, I'd say the vision is clearer than it was before, but the journey is still underway.

AK: You refer to bhakti poets and I can understand bhakti poetry is kind of a cup from where you drink modern poetry from Ramanujan to other people who draw sustenance from it. But in your case as I could see that and I was reading your biography of Sadhguru, so I could see that you had moments of deep uncertainty at some stage in life, and you say "I was dying, in a way." So, therefore I can see that there is a pre-Sadhguru phase and a post-Sadhguru phase. So, from *bhakti* poetry to this very unequivocal kind of acceptance of Sadhguru as your Guru, how does this outward that travel into your poetry? How does that really manifest in your poetry?

AS: The bhakti poets actually came into my life after I met Sadhguru. I needed to re-read them to remind me that others had felt what I was going through—this tremendous sense of homecoming. At the same time, I needed them to remind me that home is a place where you can have passionate arguments with your spiritual guide. I love the way the bhakti poets treat god as a habitually disobedient member of their families! I love the way they combine their spirited dissent with joyous homecoming.

That's what the ideal families are about, aren't they? You know that you are different from this beloved being in front of you—utterly different in your views, your opinions on many subjects—and yet, this person offers you a key to unlock a part of yourself that enables you to see how connected you are—to each other and the world.

The encounter with your spiritual guide can feel like an ambush. It can be bewildering. And the bhakti poets spoke of bewilderment like few others did. They taught me the freedom in loving wildly, and hoarsely, as well as the joy in being vulnerable (because that is what love entails). And they told me that it is possible to acknowledge your vulnerability, not to try swaddle yourself with new costumes, new armours, new bulletproof vests.

So, what happened with Sadhguru's advent in my life was a sense of wonder, which I think is an integral part of that book that you mentioned. At the same time, the journey has been potholed by doubt. The journey has had its share questions, of misgivings, of disagreements. The book I wrote distils both: the spirit of enquiry and the wonder. I didn't want to write a hagiography. I was sure about that. But I wasn't writing an exposé either.

What the journey has given me is what I think a regular spiritual practice gives everyone: I feel like a less divided being. I am more distrustful of the binaries the world would have us live by. I see the world of flesh and spirit as much more connected than I did before. I see that the spiritual journey can be about doubt and faith, adventure and anchorage, the physical and the metaphysical, the body and the beyond, the mundane and the mysterious.

Just to acknowledge that mystery; to allow that uncertainty, and not be in a hurry to fill it up with words—I think, this has been my *sadhana*, as a seeker and as a poet.

AK: When you talk about process of aging, or when you talk about this pre- and post-Sadhguru phase in your life, and when you approach God as one who is in a state of journey, there is a possibility of a narrative, still. I was intrigued by your title *Love Without a Story*, what kind of love is this, which does not have story to it?

AS: What happens when stories end? All of us have known some stories that end. We have all lost at least a pet dog, maybe one human being who mattered very much to us. I think that was the starting point of those poems.

Of course, I never think of a book like that at the start. I work on a lot of discrete poems, and later when I look at them, it seems like they are collectively returning to a particular preoccupation.

So, here the preoccupation was just this: when a story comes to an end, there is a pause; but what happens when one is not in a hurry to fill in that pause? When one is not in a hurry to fill it up with another story—what happens then? Is there a way to bring that pause into this poetry? That was my question. This unfolded into a series of poems around the themes of time, of conversation, of intimacy, of journeys.

But I want to go a little deeper, because that is implicit in your question, Akshaya. I think we have talked of *bhakti* and the spiritual journey. We've also talked of the body, which has been an integral part of my journey. I found I couldn't side-step the body or the heart, and embark on a spiritual journey. I have an early training in classical dance and I have some early training in yoga. But I am not a great practitioner of hatha yoga, I should add, and I don't practice Bharata Natyam anymore. At the same time, the metaphor that remains important to my work and my life comes from these disciplines. It is the notion of the 'spine': how to retain spine but not turn rigid. That is essential to, I think, the wisdom of many Eastern spiritual, aesthetic and martial arts traditions. It's essential to the understanding of dance and yoga. For me, this still remains important. The diversity of conversation in *Love Without a Story* with all kinds of people of diverse faiths and convictions is possible only if one knows that there is a way to bend, but not break; a way to disagree, but not hate or despise. That's something I'm still learning, by the way.

AK: So, I have seen that though there is no story, but the orbit is really circumscribed to that extent. And therefore, when you say "love without story," there is a story to even this claim.

AS: In fact, *Love Without a Story* is full of potential stories. Whether it is an encounter with a naked woman mystic, with a busful of Pakistani pilgrims on our way to Ajmer, with friends on our way to the monastery of St Francis of Assisi in La Verna, or even with a dead parent—there are stories implicit in all the poems.

But the book doesn't say there should be no more stories. It simply says that there are pauses in stories, there are great roaring silences within stories, and as long as we are in touch with those silences, it's okay. Sing your story loudly and lustily, tell all the stories you want. (Except for the fact that I will not write fiction. I will stick to poetry!)

I am interested in archetypes—the way characters in mythic stories can embody something elemental, something illuminating. So, in my poem cycle on Avvaiyar, the old woman poet of Tamil Nadu, I use her story as a stepping stone. I'm more interested in the wisdom she embodies. I'm less interested in the plot of her life.

AK: In this collection, you write a lot of 'nostalgic' poems. These are the poems when you are in your fifties, and there is perhaps a lot to look back. Through the mythical *Avvaiyar*, a woman poet or a group of women poets, you even give up the vanity of remembering things – “Nothing to declare anymore, she says, not even nostalgia.” What is left then?

AS: Avvaiyar is an old woman, she's a poet, and she's a traveller. She is an integral part of Tamil consciousness. And it's why she resonates with me, I guess. (There is a grandmother poem called 'Heirloom' that you might remember all the way back in *On Cleaning Bookshelves*. The germs of an idea, as I said, are often to be found in the first book.)

In my later work, I have grown more interested in the archetypal. And I am increasingly fascinated by the figure of the crone. What kind of 'knowing' does she represent? In this poem, Avvaiyar tells me that it is possible to have a gaze that is not stained by nostalgia. Is there such a way to look at the world? Without past and future—how would it look? She puts it quite simply:

For lovers flatten
into photographs,

photographs
into reminiscence,

reminiscence
into quiet.

And then what's left?

Perhaps just the oldest thing in the world --
love without a story.

And at the end of the poem cycle, she teaches me
more about ageing. She says there is a way to walk
the world:

learning to trust only the wisdom
that sings,

learning the equipoise
of crumble,

not looking
for a point,

knowing the point, if any,
is a shared fruit and laughter,

knowing there's no sadly
or happily ever after,

and [she] finds a new credo for mendicants,
a new paradigm:

stay molten-tongued (never lukewarm)
even if ragged in rhyme,

unhurried, forever out of step,
always on time.

AK: This is my personal belief and observation that "Spiritualism is the graveyard of poetry." How do you carry poetry and your spiritual yearnings together? Once you are into that spiritual mode, how do you recharge your poetic imagination?

AS: What a wonderful question. Someone told me something similar many years ago—an actor friend, who’s no more. He was talking about his own journey. He said, “I don’t want to get too much into this meditation stuff, because I won’t be able to act. I need to feel passion, and rage, and grief, all of that. Without that, there can be no theatre, no poetry, no art.”

I was much younger than him. And I believed that what he said made perfect sense. But I also knew I had this obstinate need for ‘something more’ that I could not name. We can just call it ‘God’ for convenience, but obviously that’s not a satisfying word. It’s just ‘something more’.

Later I discovered, however, that a spiritual journey is not about becoming devoid of rage, or passion. It is about experiencing those very emotions more deeply, but also allowing them to be transformed by the very act of acknowledgement.

During a very quiet writing residency in Scotland in the year 2003, it struck me that I had actually convinced myself that I needed to suffer in order to write! If I didn’t suffer, how would I be creative? Many are encouraged to live by this myth. But there *is* a way to feel deeply, to feel another’s pain and even your own pain deeply, and still not suffer. This was what I saw Sadhguru embody. And it fascinated me. I am not always very good at practicing this myself, and I blunder often. But there is a way.

I think learning this has been an important part of my journey. We often think being spiritual is about turning into a placid cabbage, right? I mean, it would be wonderful to look as tranquil as those Gandhara renditions of Buddha, you know. I have actually yearned to look like one of those sculptures!

Ever since I was in my teens, I thought I had questions about the meaning of life. That set me off on my journey. Then I found Joseph Campbell, the writer and scholar, who said something very interesting in an interview. (I’m paraphrasing; he says it so much better than I am.) He says, “Eventually you realize that you are not looking for the meaning of life. What you are looking for is a more

profound, more heightened experience of life itself.” That was an insight that struck me.

The spiritual journey does not make you insensitive, or insulated, or detached. In fact, it allows you to experience life much more deeply, because you’re less scared of it. This is what Sadhguru often points out. He says the spiritual journey is about being passionately involved with life, but not about getting entangled with it.

This resonates with me. When you are more secure, more at ease with yourself, you can actually listen more attentively to many more people, with their own diverse stories, fears and prejudices, because you are less clogged with yourself, or what you think of yourself.

A long answer to a short question!

AK: I think I have asked addressed some of the questions I could identify as structural to your poetic oeuvre. I would not discuss with you your seminal anthology of bhakti poetry *Eating Gods*, because in one of the literary festivals I have already discussed that book with you. But I am definitely curious to ask one question on your edited book, *Pilgrim’s India*. Of course, this book takes into its sweep a formidable array of writers who have written on their sacred journeys. As I read them, one ontological question bothers me: What is not a pilgrim?

AS: No one. We’re all pilgrims of some kind. It’s just that there are unconscious seekers and conscious ones. As you become more conscious of your journey, you become more alive to the possibility of the sacred everywhere. That is when you become a true pilgrim, I suppose. Until then you are an unconscious life traveler.

I wanted *Pilgrim’s India* to make room for every kind of traveler—the sceptic, the believer, the secular vagabond, the mendicant, the mystic. In fact, the book has that lovely poem by Arun Kolatkar, that many of you, as students of English Literature, might know. It is a poem called “The Old Woman” from his book, *Jejuri*. The speaker goes to the pilgrimage site of Jejuri in Maharashtra, but finds no sign of the sacred in the temple shrine. But when he emerges, and has this

this random encounter with an old beggar woman, what he sees in her eyes is nothing short of a *vishwa roop darshan*. A cosmic vision. So, that is the possibility of the sacred. It can assail you when you least expect it.

AK: Conversations can be never-ending. But just one last question and observation. Indian English poets often claim that they are the descendants of Indian *bhakti* poets. Do you consider yourself as a modern-day Meera or Andaal? And are we heading towards the rise of a poetry of the Divine Feminine—*shakti*, as a sub-genre within the larger rubric of contemporary Indian English poetry?

AS: Well, yes, several Anglophone poets have engaged deeply with the *bhakti* poets, from AK Ramanujan to Dilip Chitre and Arun Kolatkar, and many more.

I will say that in my case, I turned to the *bhakti* poets, primarily as a spiritual seeker, not as a translator. I was experiencing something within myself that they gave me a language for. Eventually, they ended up helping me not just as a seeker, but as a poet as well. That's when I reclaimed them as my clan, my tribe. That later led to the anthology, *Eating God*.

But do I consider myself a modern-day Meera or Andal? No, I certainly don't. For one, it reeks of hubris. Once you claim to be a great *bhakta*, you cease to be one. As a lover, you are, by definition, flawed. Love returns you to a lower-case identity. No capital letters are possible in there.

There are also contextual differences. I am a modern-day seeker with a heritage of scepticism, and one that I value. But then, there are strongly sceptical elements in many *bhakti* poets too, such as Kabir and Tukaram. So, they can sound uncannily like our contemporaries as well!

Let me say that I recognize something of the experience of *bhakti*—the intensity and fear and desperation that fuels it. Also, the doubt that goes with it. I belong here with these crazy poets, because they're

a tribe of heartbroken, unlicensed seekers. These are proud amateurs, not card-carrying members of the spiritual elite.

About the poetry of Shakti as a sub-genre in Indian poetry, I don't know. I hope not actually, because if it becomes a category, a certain self-consciousness, a certain preciousness might enter the picture. And that is the death of good poetry!

Let's just say that it may not have been fashionable to talk about Saraswati or the Muses, but poets have always known we need our goddesses! Art has always involved a mix of manual labour and mystery. Without mystery, there is no art. And I'd add, without the Goddess' grace, there is no poetry.

AK: With this, we come to the conclusion of this session. As usual, talking to you has always been an experience of some kind of self-reflexive expansion. Of course, talking to an academic may not be as fulfilling as talking to a self-effacing mystic woman. But there is one thing connects us in the vibrant conversational network—we in our distinct ways are seekers.

AS: I just want to say I am particularly grateful for this session, Akshaya. Thank you.



In Conversation with Amlanjyoti Goswami

(This is an edited version of a conversation conducted on-stage with poet Amlanjyoti Goswami in the auditorium of the Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh on 31 March, 2023)

Akshaya Kumar: As academics we have this propensity to place poets into brackets. In fact, we feel emancipated if are able to pigeonhole the poets into some ready-made templates or epistemes of canon. Some poets are labelled as spiritualists, some as romanticists, some as modernists, and some as experimentalists, so on and so forth. When I read your *River Wedding*, I tried to map the universe within which you operate, knowing fully well that all mapping can be very tentative and porous, and that only some poems can fit in any kind of rubric, the others simply escape out. When I read the second collection, the recent one, *Vital Signs*, I abandoned the idea of dovetailing you into any given template. In the second collection, each poem has its own distinct trajectory. Each poem has its own grammar, so to say. Each poem has its context-specific mini play embedded in it. The only common thing about these poems is probably their innate playfulness. You create some degree of conflict, then the transitions are worked out. I found that these poems are about people, about places, about things, about seasons, about family, about trees. Would you like to assign a category, a working category for yourself as poet? What is your credo as a poet?

Amlanjyoti Goswami: I do a bunch of things generally in life, which have almost no relation to each other. I was conflicted about that initially from the lens of identity, because identity usually is about stereotypes, is about fitting in, it's about adjustment and so on. Till of course I read about pluralities, and I discovered the heteronyms of Fernando Pessoa many years ago. That was very liberating for me. Heteronyms for Pessoa were not just pseudonyms. They were distinct personalities in themselves. Pessoa had at least four very notable heteronyms who were independent poets in themselves. There was

Alberto Caeiro, Álvaro de Campos and Ricardo Reis, and Fernando Pessoa himself, among another fifty odd lesser-known heteronyms. Now of course Pessoa's universe was very contained in itself and came from a particular historical age. These heteronyms would also fight each other, in their own parallel universe. They would fight over girlfriends. All kinds of interesting things were going on. There was *The Book of Disquiet*, I think, and also heteronyms turned up in his collected poems. But yeah, it was very interesting for me to see that the same poet has at least four poetic personas, all of whom are independent in themselves and can qualify as distinct poets. Jose Saramago has a novel where he brings in Ricardo Reyes as a character. It's called *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*.

So, coming back to the question of where I see myself. If I use Harold Bloom's idea of "anxiety of influence," I suffer less anxiety of influence now, but maybe ten years ago the idea of breaking out of established molds was very clear to me. Now I am trying to break out of my own mold. I look at my first book *River Wedding*, which like first love remains very precious to me. But after a few years since the publication of that book, I have also discovered that the person who wrote *River Wedding* (fortunately or otherwise) seems different from the person who wrote *Vital Signs*. Even if there are commonalities as there would be, perhaps it is also a journey in the poet's own growth. In terms of subjects or themes taken up, and maybe a certain maturity of writing.

But to be honest with you, these are only two books. I have not written much. I have only written two books. I have been writing poetry for about twenty odd years. For fifteen years I didn't publish anything because I didn't feel the need to. I write poetry because I really love it. It makes my day. When I don't read or write good poetry, I feel something is missing from my life, and therefore a gaping hole in my life has been filled by poetry. It has given me healing. It is extremely gratifying for me to know that people who read some of this work also find some meaning, find some fragments in my poetry which they find interesting. Which I feel is very interesting because I did not write for any particular person. If it makes some sense to them, these are great rewards, and these rewards are unthinkable when you are writing the poem.

AK: You used this word “disquiet,” and you insist that you are not one persona but many. But there is one word that dominates throughout your poetry—quiet or quietude. So, does that also not in a way pre-empt you from writing poetry which could be poetry of dissonance or poetry of protest? “Quiet” is writ large in *Vital Signs*, almost every second-third poem has this word “quiet.” Of course, a poem follows its own trajectory; you create that inner conflict. But there is a quietness that envelops everything. What is this propensity?

AG: Possibly because, I mean, it could be that poetry gives me satisfaction, so it’s coming out in a way. Maybe it’s actually very fulfilling and maybe the fulfillment is achieved through the page which itself becomes a limiting factor. But what you say could well be true, if we go back all the way to poetic traditions. Whenever my mind is cluttered and I need clearing, I go back to haiku, because that is where I began to read the oldest haiku poets. But, back to this quiet thing you say. I could have written some protest poetry as well, if you can call that protest poetry. But instead of a label of protest poetry, I would rather be able to convey an element of protest in a manner that is not obvious or blunt and boring. I am able to convey a feeling of protest in less predictable ways, so to speak. I think there is a poem in *Vital Signs* about this policeman, “To you bottled up in uniform.” It’s not a poem that I intended to read today. It might answer your question on why my stuff is not so loud. Here’s “To you bottled up in uniform”

It is not always
you get to decide
the colour of the street.

Choose wise
then tell others why,
You prefer the gates

Open, not shut (I know)
And why the girl offering a rose
was doing the right thing

And why sometimes, it is all right
To look away.
Sometimes, do ask

Why we are all here
And what made you
Pull the writer's shirt

And drag him away
When he was just giving
Another lesson from history.

Your uniform will wear out by end of day
And you will once again
Become father, mother, brother

Watching TV, wondering silent why
It came to this
And why that man on the screen

With face just like you,
Angry, baton wielding, must be
Someone else.

AK: Somewhere you write that “night’s silence is louder than the day’s chatter”. There is this yearning towards quietude. *Vital Signs* is all about the matter. Silence is metaphysics, matter is the humdrum. How do you reconcile the two?

AG: They have to go together. For me metaphysics is not “I wander lonely as a cloud.” For me metaphysics is a tulsi plant outside the house, and next to the plant is a lit earthen lamp. That to me is a metaphysical way of getting there. In other words, it has to go through matter. I recognize that I will always fail because for me everybody in academia seems to be Lacanian. I am in that sense not a pure Lacanian, let’s put it that way. I am more Deleuzian.

So, for me there is a whole world outside language which I cannot convey through language. What I am doing on a page is trying to put

together fragments of a much larger universe which is beyond language. In that sense verbal forms include poetry, and poetry is the closest words come to getting into the heart of the matter. Verbal forms are always limiting in that sense. You have said dance will convey something else. A painting does something more. When do we prefer a painting over a movie, a motion picture? And then there is music, which is also non-verbal. So, there are elements which are outside language, which the word cannot capture. Walter Pater once said, "All art aspires to a condition of music."

Call it *Nirguna*, call it whatever. In that sense it is an acknowledgement of the limitations of the word itself. If you look at these letters on a page, dressed as a poem, as scatterings. Scatterings across slightly larger universe where non-verbal components are much wider. Perhaps that might explain why there is this quietude. This could also be an acknowledgement that I am not good at explosive poetry. Maybe I haven't tried it out. Maybe the stuff I have read doesn't appeal to me in the same way. But it is not to say that I don't want to write poetry which is also a form of protest, and so on. I think there are strands of that coming out. What is it that you mean when you mean protest poetry? When somebody's a protestor, what do you mean? Protesting against whom? Is it all unidimensional? No. So, can I in some way convey the multi-dimensional aspects of even protest in a manner that makes sense to me?

AK: You used this phrase "anxiety of influence" that Harold Bloom brought this into critical circulation. But why should one be so reticent about influence? Is influence not to be disclosed in that sense? You refer to Ghalib, you refer to Ginsberg, to other poets, and to painters as well. You refer to streetlights that look like Van Gogh's sunflowers. Many traditions—verbal and non-verbal—from across the continents seem to provide intertextuality to your poetic fabric. So, what is your 'poetic lineage', if I may use this expression, to ask you about the influences you have had?

AG: I'll come back to anxiety. I feel that there is less anxiety of influence when you are more in control over what you're doing. So, when I mean anxiety, I mean fifteen years ago. When you are trying to figure out what is good and you are writing lot of what is called

juvenilia. But you are trying to figure it out, you don't want to write derivative work. The interesting thing is that my introduction to poetry came primarily through translation. Which is why, I think it is different from the general English poetry in India. So, translation from largely initially European modernists, 20th century modernists. People like Pessoa. Then there was the Brazilian poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade. There is an Italian tradition with Cesare Pavese and so on. Then of course the Japanese masters starting from the Haiku tradition (Basho, Issa and Shiki) right down to the 20th century post modernists like Shuntaro Tanikawa. Among Indians I would put Arun Kolatkar in the same kind of category, because he comes from a very bilingual tradition.

So, in other words, while I was writing in English, it failed to touch me initially, at least typical English poetry including twentieth century poetry, and this was a big problem because it was as if the poetry is thrown at you in school, in early college, and yet you can't connect. The kind of things you want to write about or what you write about, you don't see in poetry. And therefore, you ask that question, is this poem okay? Of course, now I feel, yeah whatever I do will be okay or not okay, doesn't matter. But at that time, it does matter, and you don't have enough people to say that this is okay. So, in that sense my discovery of writing in English did not happen through English poetry and didn't happen through American poetry. I think I got a kindred connection in Irish poetry but not Yeats, but Seamus Heaney first, and after Heaney there were others thankfully, because Heaney was also becoming too Latin for me. There were people who were from the same generation—Derek Mahon, Paula Meehan and so on. And of course, I had a great early mentor in Pradip Acharya, who understands poetry better than most people around.

I found Derek Mahon a great solace because he was writing about everyday concerns. Very typical everyday things. And to me in my own personal development as a person, the idea of everyday was becoming and has become more and more important. The commonplace has become very important. Whether it's a sense of place or a sense of time. The idea of this moment, this time, this talking, this listening, is perhaps to me the most important thing. In other words, poetry as a way of happening as opposed to poetry

makes nothing happen. I think there is no anxiety of influence as you can see it. There is none. But to say that I did not have those kinds of issues, questions at one point, would not be true. And frankly, whether there is a forum or not, there are not enough people to answer your questions.

When you are a young poet, you want to ask questions, you want to know how to publish, you want to know what to do. Is this okay? So, then you have to be really kind of, either pig-headed about it, or you really must be a little ‘off’ frankly. To say that I want to still do this and let’s see where it takes me. That’s why I am saying you have to love it; it has to be fun for you. It has to be playful. Because otherwise if you say I am climbing a mountain, you finally realise there is no mountain. But at that time, you think *mera pehla kitab kab niklega?* And then you are wondering *mera kitab toh nikal hi nahin raha, koi lega hi nahin, mujhe koi janta bhi nahin hai*, etcetera, etcetera. So that is the anxiety part and I guess some of it is voiced out to elite circles of poetry I have steadfastly kept away from.

AK: Was Kolatkar not a part of this circle?

AG: Even if he was, his bilingualism enabled him to transcend it. Remember he was also an ad man. Even *Jejuri’s* jackets he meticulously designed. The original Pras Prakashan publication in colours of rust and yellow.

AK: And interestingly Penguin did not publish it.

AG: In fact, Kolatkar refused to sign a contract. He said, “I can’t trust anybody.” So, in that sense what is the gatekeeping process? See, this gatekeeping culture is actually redundant, because the gates don’t matter. Only when there are gates should there be a gatekeeper. When you say the gates don’t matter, and frankly, online has really helped broaden the reach. It’s postmodern, yeah? Because you don’t know what is good poetry, because it’s entirely subjective in the hands of the editor. But it has also enabled publishing in journals, and because journals don’t have to factor in printing costs and all that ... online is very liberating. I have been liberated by online. By realizing that I

don't have to publish a book, I can simply send my poem anywhere. Somebody takes it, great. Somebody does not take it, too bad. It doesn't matter. It's not a reflection of myself. But it does sharpen your pencil, it does sharpen your mind, because you are thinking.

AK: Kolatkar famously wrote, "My pencil is sharpened on both the ends."

AG: Correct, correct. Thanks for that. It was subliminal.

AK: And also, Kolatkar was from J.J. School of Arts Bombay. He was also into painting.

AG: I think there is a strong visual sense in my poetry. I am trying to see if I can cultivate a strong aural sense which is from the ear. But, yes, they are very visual in nature. It is what it is. Paintings enable me to think in terms of images, and some paintings evoke strong images in me, and some of my poetry also appears as very visual. But it is an interesting idea you have given me, because maybe I should collaborate with painters.

AK: No, no, but there is a catch in this. If you are into ekphrasis then this in a way implies that experience is already mediated by something. So, instead of encountering life first-hand, you are using a painting for your poetic tale. So that way it becomes already once removed from the actual site of happening.

AG: But what isn't once removed? I am saying even text is mediated, no? If I am writing in language, it is itself a mediation. If as you say students have translated some of my poems into Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi, that itself is a mediation, and maybe those poems are different from the original poems and there is no authenticity anyway. So, in that sense, I am not a votary of authenticity.

AK: But I am saying that in a way it becomes kind of a closed-circuit of various arts—painting, poetry, music. One is that you remain in that rarified zone of high art where one art talks to another art. The other is that you plunge into life.

AG: I think both go together in my work. Both go together. But I don't make a distinction in that sense. To me it's not as if painting is not a part of life. It is. So, life is not separate from a painting. There is life and then the painting is trying to do something. Like poetry. Poetry is not separate from life. It is a part of life. Life is also part of it. So that way the distinctions fade away. In other words, you could say I am very greedy. I take whatever I get, and if it evokes a poem, I will make it a poem. Whether I can make it a poem or not is not entirely up to me, so therefore one has to be humble. While I will be greedy and while I will be trying to make everything art, so to speak. Make everything new.

AK: In one poem you say, and whether that is autobiographical or not, but you say that "you could not paint anything on the canvas because for thirty years your teacher wanted you to look at the flowers only." So, are you making that deficit in the poetry?

AG: No, no. Actually, it's interesting. There is a poem called "Art Lessons" and it talks about my old art teacher and who recently passed away, and you know that was the time of those TV serials on Sunday mornings in the 1980s, Ramayana & Mahabharata. Sunday mornings were very important because you could watch TV in the morning on Doordarshan. There was Ek Do Teen Char, if you remember those days. So, for some reason my parents thought that I should also learn painting But, what we did was very interesting actually. The art teacher, Dhruba Deka said, "you don't have to paint at all, you don't have to draw at all. You just keep looking at this thing." It was a flower vase. For kids like me it was, "My goodness. I would rather play cricket." But later it came back to me, this idea of just presence. Modern painting being good or not being good, what was that? The idea that presence is what he was trying to cultivate. A kind of meditative sense of presence about things around you. That was what came back to me. But I don't make too much of a deal about it. If you see my third book, my next book, when it comes out, it may not have anything on paintings!

AK: You refer to lyrical narratives. I could see that these narratives have their own latent lyricism also. But the narrative that you build

is fairly descriptive. Do you think that a microscopic description has the possibility of sublimating itself to the level of poetry?

AG: Earlier I didn't. Now I absolutely do. Earlier this was my dilemma. I thought lyric and narrative are two different worlds, and I was paralysed because I wanted to write the perfect line. Till I discovered there is no perfect line. And the narrative was in the realm of stories, in the realm of novels. In the realm of you know, fiction and non-fiction. Our oral tradition in poetry is entirely narrative. You read right from our epics to also subaltern epics. Read Homer. These are nothing but oral narratives. You know sometimes I feel that this tyranny of the page is also a problem. You know, I feel sometimes this is because of technology, no? It has to be printed, or today when you have screens, it has to be on A4 size. So A4 gives you great discipline, you almost realize how you are writing. But at the same time imagine it as a scroll. You are opening a narrative epic. Look at Ghulam Mohammed Sheikh's paintings. Where you are telling a story or so many stories, which are all narratives, not one story. Look at the Persian masters, and you see that in the oral traditions. The bard, the minstrel was telling stories, and so in that sense why can't we? Perhaps, it is possible today, you never know. How the medium is also changing. So, you might say that if descriptivism is less poetic. Maybe that is what you are hinting at.

AK: Yes, it sublimates, and images cumulate and gather some kind of surcharge to culminate into a well-made poem.

AG: Which is why I have this idea; I can't call it a theory. This idea or theory of what I call *poetic momentum*. Poetic momentum is where at some point in the writing, the poem takes over. Takes over the poet. The description, the writing. It is not streams of consciousness. It is a sense of where the poem is a kind of achieved momentum. It's like driving at fourth gear, fifth gear ... the poem starts moving on its own, and it is not entirely wielded by the mind. And this is something that has happened with other genres as well. Novels do it. You ask short story writers about how do the characters start defining themselves? They say that the characters start doing their own thing, and after a while the novelist has to sit back and watch.

AK: You begin with some plot and after the fourth page the characters or metaphors begin to take their own course.

AG: So, in my case, it may start in a particular way. I put words to page, want to write in a particular way. But if it is going right, it is turning out to be completely different or unexpected by the time you are reaching the second page or third page. Which is why I feel that you should let the narrative unfold. Let it unfold.

AK: This is what happens in your poem “A Hundred Miles.” Some of the poems are written during the difficult times of Covid here. Would you read? That would make more sense. I find that there are steps—one step, two steps, three steps, and then finally it culminates into a poetical narrative.

AG: There is a subtle or not so subtle politics here. The context is obvious when I read it. It is called “A Hundred Miles,” which is a take on the song by the same name. It is my tribute to something I heard when I was a kid.

The room overflows
With people
Known, unknown.

They place their bundles
Silent, without a word.
Another hunches by the door, once in.

A third with a child, asks for milk
With silent eyes, words not spoken.
This is all quiet as a painting

The solemn dark of Amrita Shergill’s Three
Sisters.
The stark lines of Somnath Hore.
The moving bones of Zainul Abedin

But the images are stirring.
The door is unlatched

More come in.

They are asked: do you need anything?
Tables are removed, then chairs
Make room for hope.

No one is asking for tea or water.
They are just happy to be in.
No one asks where they are from, why they are
here

And what happened to them along the way.
All that later.
Right now, they are here

Noah's ark, a room with no view, no windows
The dark outside,
When four by four means forty.

AK: So, it takes a while, a step-wise incremental build-up, before you reach to "four-by-four means forty." There is a gradual incremental build up to it, a long cataloguing of images and impressions.

AG: But if you ask ... Did I think of that last line when I started? No. Am I responsible for that last line? Honestly humbly, no.

AK: There is this another important recurrent image of moon, or you may call it symbol. Moon is always a presiding kind of presence in the poetry and there are a number of poems where you leap forth into a new territory of the moon. Somewhere you say that you prefer to look upwards toward the moon because there is a lot of strife down below.

AG: So maybe it is more Thanks for telling me because it is not something I am very proud of myself. If there is too much of moon, maybe I am not living up to my own expectations.

AK: No, but this poem “The man on the tree.” reads good. Here again there is a sustained good description that creates a gradual build-up and then you lapse into some an epiphanic revelation of the ‘four-by-four means forty’ kind.

The man on the tree
Watches the moon.
He is looking for a way

To go back.
He is not certain
He will reach

Where he came from.
Now he is stuck in limbo
Cannot go higher, cannot come down

Lend me a hand,
The rest mock him.
Let me be, he pleads

The birds are coming for me.
They are feathered and mean
They believe in nothing

And when they flutter
A thousand illnesses
Creep upon you

Why are you up then?
Someone asked,
To jeers and cheers.

Because I cannot see a thing,
From below, he said.
Down there, only strife.

AG: There’s more. And then he says, what is there down below? We also have “neighbours and prying aunts/ ... and the stirring sunset.”

AK: And you have lot many poems about city strife. City is not your bastion and there is a propensity to look at city as a kind of a semi-hell, full of strife. But there are poems of your native town-scapes, full of nostalgia and very intimate reflections.

AG: I'll read a city poem which is a different kind of city poem. I am reading a part of "Bus Routes of Childhood."

Machkhowa: Fish eater.
Dighalipukhuri: Long pond. Not Silpukhuri: Stone pond.
Or Joorpukhuri: Twin ponds. Nak kata pukhuri: Chopped nose pond.
Ambari: Mango garden. Bharalumukh: Mouth of river.
Sharab Bhatti: Booze joint.
Adabari: Ginger garden. Near Jalukhari: Pepper garden.
Jorabat: Sticking ways. To the hills where the air turns cold.
Teeni aali: Three alleys. Saari aali: Four alleys.
Bijoynagar: Victory city. Swamped by the flood.
Barowari: Twelve came together (for a cause).
Pan Bazaar: Betal leaf bazaar. Books housed in childhood.
Aath gaon: Eight villages. Can't find any.
Puronigudam: Old godown. Near ma's place.
Palashbari: Garden of palash flowers. Dad's place.
Khatiamari: Where the deer was killed.
Santipur: Place of peace. Near a hospital, a football field.
Nagaon: Nine villages. Where ma comes from.

Bus routes of childhood. No place to sit, standing room only.
On the ledge, breeze on hair.
Travelling tomorrow with yesterday's eyes.
.....

Once upon a time, there was no city.
There were only dreams, gardens, a flower market.
And you still ask me, why do I like it so much?

As an aside, we were talking about, this poem was published in *The Poetry Review* in UK. I can tell you that the poem would not be published in an Indian publication today, and that's an irony. I don't know why it is.

AK: Why did it find a publisher there and not in India?

AG: I sent it to The Poetry Review because I thought it was a good poem. I felt it was a good poem, maybe it will find a resonance, but ...

AK: There is an element of exotica of childhood, of the folklore.

AG: I grew up like this. This is autobiography. What is folklore for someone else is reality for me.

AK: And this is what I am saying. That's why the UK press is interested and the Indian press is not?

AG: I feel that something is happening in poetry in UK right now, because people have been pushing at it for the last thirty forty years now against the white panchayat which rules British poetry.

AK: Why panchayat? It is some kind of an underworld.

AG: Underworld is where we are coming from. The white male panchayat has ruled for a while. Not that it matters. It doesn't matter. What has happened over the last twenty thirty years there? There has been so much of push from the edges in UK and certainly from performance poetry, which many people don't consider poetry. They say performance poetry is not poetry. I refuse to take that as true. Basically, because there has been so much of pushing, now finally the thing has broken. I feel that they are open to influences from outside typical English influences. Maybe less in conventional England though. You know the Irish keep publishing me, and I find

that very interesting. Another very nice thing there which I feel is lacking in Indian English poetry is that we don't have a journal culture. Poetry does not thrive in books; it thrives in a journal culture. It thrives in conversation; it thrives in notes that you circulate among people and so on. However small it is. It is not about how big or small it is.

AK: Are you referring to the seminal role of the little magazine movement in augmenting the cause of poetry?

AG: Yes, the little magazines. This is what keeps (and has kept) poetry alive. This is what I get the maximum kick out of. I don't get so much kick out of the book. The book is good because it has to survive; it has to go to the library. But it is the journal which keeps poetry alive. It is the journal which keeps you going every day.

I would not go by that senile theory that the city is this bad place, the city of early sixties or that the city is a place where the individual gets smothered. Individual versus the bad city. The capitalist machine so to speak. Mahanagar, all of that.

AK: You are into human settlements. I mean as a professional you are working with the Indian Institute for Human Settlements.

AG: I am into human settlements. I feel that caring about cities or caring about one's place in cities is about caring about neighborhoods, about habitats, about places where you live, and this is what you must celebrate. So, this idea of saying that there was this romantic idea of the rural and it was also very nice and all that. Politically you know it's not true. There's enough written on it. How exploitative it is. Just the city itself has so many contradictions. So, I feel that this dichotomy of rural versus urban, city as this big bad thing where the individual encounters the city. These things are very tried and tested truisms which I think are beginning to unravel, and my way of tackling that is to not look at *the City*, but look at places, locales inside a city. Yeah, there is an element of folklore there, I guess. Exotic, you are right. It is a right criticism, that okay we have all these fancy words, so for a foreigner it looks very fancy, exotic *ho gaya*.

AK: Could be.

AG: Maybe, maybe. But to me I didn't think of a foreign audience while writing this. I wrote a poem because I had to write a poem. I wrote a poem because I thought my "Bus Routes of Childhood" in an autobiographical form says something about the city, says something about things changing, and perhaps I could put in a manner which is different from how a poem is written and that is all there is to it.

AK: Not only in this poem but I could see a poem on food and all those things. There is this relentless cataloguing, you catalogue one food and rate it with some great, parallel kind of a universe. Is cataloguing another term for plural inheritances? Or what is it?

AG: Kolatkar has this great poem—that alphabet catalogue if you remember. It is nothing but a catalogue. Does a catalogue mean just writing words down? The question is, is this a poem? And I am saying that this question is an irrelevant question, and the more one asks the question, "Is this is a poem?" *Yeh Kavita hai? Yeh kya hai?* I think you are missing the experience of having read something. Even novels are becoming descriptive, different from the way novels were written earlier. Novels are experimenting a lot these days with form, with structure, with meaning.

AK: Yes, I do recollect the opening lines from Kolatkar's "The Alphabet": "anvil arrow bow box and brahmin/ cart chariot and compost heap/ ..." African writers also use alphabets rather ingenuously. Walter Abish's *Alphabetical Africa* is one instance of the creative deployment of alphabets. Even in medieval Punjabi *sufi* poetry of Bullel Shah *siharphi* (golden alphabet) is a well-known form of versification.

AG: Yeah. Modern English poets are also bringing such practices of oral tradition. So, novels are not looking like novels anymore. Poetry has had the prose poem form for so many years. So, in that sense the genre itself is changing. Instead of asking: is it a poem or is it not a poem, perhaps we move out of that bracket. But if you say that it is just cataloguing, then it may well be valid criticism...

AK: No, but cataloguing is not to be held down. Creative cataloguing also builds up the poetic climax.

AG: Cataloguing alone is not enough. What is it doing? It has to do something. If it is not doing something then it ends up as mere description. If my cataloguing is not doing it, it is a weakness in my poetry which I am happy to understand and say that yes, it cannot be entirely only a catalogue.

AK: So, as I said this childhood poem that you refer to was *exotica*. Now there is a poem called “Tropical Vocabulary” which you write, and which is, I am using kind of a cliché term, kind of a postcolonial poem. You are saying that your vocabulary is deliberately monosyllabic and not heavily worded. When I read your collection, it is very simply worded.

AG: I think that’s intentional. I’ll read out “Tropical Vocabulary,” because I feel very strongly about this poem. Many of us may have felt the same way in high school.

X, used heavy words to crush spirits.
Think *contumacious*, or *concatenation* or on better
days, *serendipity*.
One day I took my 6/10 to my father who liked
words
To be light as a feather, who knew his Lawrence
and Shakespeare.

Then there was Y, who wanted to crush the
imagination.
Didn’t want young birds to fly on a wing.
Who said: cut one’s cloth as it fits
That there was no better way to pass the
examination of life.

But I was lucky.
My father told me – not to worry, not to cram those
notes

With words that spell empire, the long arm of it.
That the marks on the page, were sorry reminders
of its long tail.

The sun that set long ago while some went on
believing.
Or my father's – PA – who told me *take it easy*,
clinking a glass.
He said: write a page on Eliot: *some say the world
will end in fire,*
Some say in ice. This was language, its beauty,
how you held it

Against the autumn sun
No more tooth-breaking words from the guy at
school.
I wish I remembered more, but the bone crunchers
evade my knuckles
They are to be seen, not remembered.

And so it is.
I have made a calling of stringing words on a high
wire.
They dangle simple as a sentence. They have
power.
They have long tails. They bite.

So as is obvious, you know, the ability to use very difficult words seems to characterise our vocabulary and we get marks for it. I have also been a victim of such a school experience, of such a system so to speak. But thankfully I've grown up near people with cultural capital. My father, Robin Goswami, has been a professor of English Literature. He retired as the Head of Department of Cotton College in Guwahati which is now a university. He taught English for thirty-five years but he never pushed anything at me at all. He's very surprised that I write poetry (Everyone laughing). So, he has a strange anxiety of influence. (Everyone laughing). In reverse, with my own father who I can never impress, and who also doesn't want to be

impressed, and who is very surprised that of all things, “Goodness, *tu bas Kavita likhta hain?*”

AK: And this is despite your being an alum from Harvard.

AG: But that is why I am saying that this identity business has never been so appealing to me, because the minute you ask this question of who I am, it's a limiting question. Then you will limit what you do. Whereas if you do what you do, then *kisi aur ko kya bolna ki kaun hain aap?*

AK: Most of the people who I meet from the Department of Laws are full of esoteric and a very different kind of language. How do you keep this law-lingo out of your poetic vocabulary? Do you consciously filter out the jargon of law?

AG: I have thought about it at times. It is not about identity as much as how do these traditions influence each other. The legal tradition is a strong written tradition, a very logical tradition. It has its elements of rhetoric but logic is the leitmotif. Things have to come together, so perhaps this has also helped me. And law does enable a certain conciseness of thought, a certain discipline of thinking which is good generally. When does it become a problem? It becomes a problem when logic takes over and logic becomes an end in itself. It throttles imagination, it throttles spirit, it throttles feelings because these are considered ‘external’. All that matters is the case, the evidence produced. So, I approach law as a disciplining tradition. And it is a written tradition largely. I also studied sociology. So, sociology as you know called itself a social science. The idea that you have to call something social science as opposed to humanities means that you're already on to get the legitimacy of the sciences. So, it is empiricism. You have scientific methods, techniques, all that stuff.

Now, today we are beset, and I think humanities in general, Literature included, Political Science, History and questions of method are coming in, are beset with this obsession of being empirically correct to such an extent that it has almost become correlation and regression. In some Political Science departments in America, ethics and principles are no longer taught. It's mostly correlation and regression,

all mathematics. It's quantitative, it's entirely mathematical. So, I think there is this one thing in my poems. There is a very strong anti-empiricist thought in it. So even matter is not matter because you can't measure it and put it inside a test tube and you can't say this is matter because I can see it, I can feel it.

You are Literature and Cultural Studies students, so I don't need to explain this to you. But I think there is a sense that the minute you step out of this auditorium, step out into other worlds, as I think we all must, you will feel it. I honestly feel that my own work will improve the more I step into other worlds which I have no clue of. Which are possibly antithetical to me. So, in other words reading a good piece on Quantum Physics which I know nothing about. So, it's always nice to get out of one's comfort zone and read stuff, which is outside, but it also induces reactions in you because you realize that those worlds are different, including AI, and Chat GPT, god knows what else. You are talking about poetry being written through an AI machine. The world is throwing empiricism at you and it is saying that two by two is equal to four and that is it, and there is nothing else. But this is Plato in a way. This is why the poet got banished.

AK: So, we are back to Plato's. But what about Chat GPT? Would poetry survive AI invasion into the intimate creative domain?

AG: I think we will always survive, because we will go underground (Everyone laughing). And I feel therefore that the idea of "Oh we are margins" doesn't make me feel bad, because margins exist when there is a centre. In a postmodern world I don't know what the centre is anymore. I talk to my friends who are writing novels, established novelists who are struggling. So, if I say I am struggling because I have only two books of poetry, doesn't sell, nobody reads them, etcetera, etcetera. They are saying the same thing "very tough." So don't assume that "Oh! Poetry is at the margins and there is the novel and there is some non-fiction and there is some stuff that Penguin wants." I think these are all largely monetary concerns.

Poetry has always survived. Poetry has never been read by more than ten percent of the people. It has been a minority discourse, but oral traditions, oral renderings and therefore Bhakti is so important, and

therefore those subaltern traditions are very important, because they actually help in social transformation. I don't know how technology will happen. I am already saying: go online because it is fine. It's a place where you can publish. We may be in a situation where we may be going back to oral, even as technology. And maybe it will be different kind of oral.

So, poetry will survive but it will perhaps always be in some ways different. That's why I am saying when you ask me this question of why is it so silent? Why is it a subliminal kind of thing? Because I feel this is the heart of poetry. This part will survive. Our feelings will survive. I keep wondering for example, and Ashis Nandy has written about it. One has to qualify what one says these days (Everyone laughing). This is no disrespect to anybody, but I would wonder about, scientists with empiricism from morning nine o'clock to six evening. But also, there is a private universe where you know who you are, depending on which deity you are worshipping. And I felt that this double consciousness is there. Typical Western rationality will be like, "But if you are this Bhakti, then you cannot be that." I feel that these are only boxes. We are more complex, more layered and far more surprising than we think ourselves to be. And because it is like that, there will always be dissonance. There has to be some outlet for that dissonance, for catharsis, which I think poetry will fulfill. That way it will always survive. It will survive differently but it will survive. It has always survived.

AK: There is one line in your collection *Vital Signs* "every breath is a birthday" that resonates as a grim reminder of Covid days. I think it was written when Covid was at its peak?

AG: Yes, it reminds you of a refrain by Ghalib, doesn't it?

AK: Ghalib is inescapable, is that right?

AG: Ghalib is inescapable, yes you are right. But my post-coloniality if I may, doesn't have to go through Lucknow and Delhi. I grew up in Assam. My mother tongue is Assamese. So, my tradition is different ... I am not trying to be folkloric here. You cannot club me inside the North-East poetry circles either. That kind of folkloric

tradition I moved out of, because that again looks very predictable to me. But nevertheless, I am not in the North Indian traditions. Even Agha Shahid Ali is to me within the ghazal tradition. The ghazal tradition is alien to me. The quatrain, the refrain at the end and this “wah-wah” (Everyone laughing) is alien to me. So, in that sense you can call me a modernist in some ways.

AK: Let me go back to the line. Tell us more about the philosophical or even existential underpinnings of treating every breath as a birthday.

AG: This I learned from a Buddhist monk because he said that you know... (deep breath)

AK: Birthday?!

AG: Yes! There are three sections in *Vital Signs*. First is “Life”, second is “Belief.” So, belief is where I say it is not enough to paint a boat. You must make it float. The third one is called “Fellowship” where I write about Gandhi and say what will Gandhi be today, and at the end I say, “he would travel incognito”. There’s “Ghalib at the Door” too.

Ghalib stayed outside
Last night.
I had forgotten about him

Just as I had forgotten about
Other things

In that folded universe:

Galli and kuccha, mohalla and chowk.
Qasida and nazraana and kalam.

To explain all that
Would take a dictionary
and many anthologies.
Perhaps, Ghalib in person.

Not that Ghalib turned up drunk
After midnight
and I wouldn't let him in.

He cares, I know.
He still hasn't received his pension.

AK: You have this capacity to invest energy into the most static things, sites and scenes. Map, for instance, is also your part-time aeroplane, so to say. "Books stare/ Like jelebis and samosas on the counter." Rivers are not just routine water-ways, they dance, sing and marry. The image of the wedding of the river Sompawoti resonates in my mind. Let me read some lines:

All the rivers would come,
Kopili, Bordoisila, Dibang, Disang, Kolong,
All the sisters of Brahmaputra would
Flow through their village!
It would rain and thunder,
So much fun.

The poetic playfulness accentuates the image, and lends a degree of intimacy to the poetic idiom. Let me conclude the conversation on this note. Amlanjyoti's poetry indeed has vital signs and we hope that in the days to come we shall see more of this kind of experiential 'felt' poetry.

AG: Thank you.



In Conversation with Kiriti Sengupta

(This is an edited version of the conversation that took place on stage with the poet, Kiriti Sengupta, on 16 March 2023, at Mulk Raj Anand Auditorium, Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh)

Akshaya Kumar: Some tend to think that poetry has an obligation to strike a high octave and that it must attain some level of scriptural profundity. Some others tend to approach poetry as a discourse of engagement with ‘this’ life without any gloss. Should poetry be metaphysical or scriptural? Can it be purely ideological? Can it be purely activist? So, between these two kinds of extremes, one, wherein poetry is pitched into that quasi-sacred, quasi-metaphysical zone; other, wherein it is assigned an interventionist role, an instrumentality of sorts—the contemporary poet has to make all kinds of negotiations. So, my first is: how do you retrieve poetry from these divergent pulls? One of your earlier books, *Reflections on Salvation*, was a kind of rewriting of the *Gita*. Eighteen chapters of the *Gita*, and you matched them with your eighteen small snippets, verses, and correspondences. All are very subversive, and it was very brave on your part to do that. So, what is your preferred zone—poetic spiritualism or poetic activism?

Kiriti Sengupta: Readers mark me for my short verses. They know I don’t feel comfortable on stage. I have stage fright. At public appearances like this, I say, “I am nervous.” So, my answers will be brief, if not cryptic. But, I must add to your observation: unlike other genres of literature, poetry must depict the truth. No other genres have this compulsion. Therefore, when someone writes a protest poem, a love poem, or a verse soaked in the nectar of philosophy, a poem is truth, nothing else.

AK: That makes my task very difficult. Your brief answers would leave many things unsaid, which is very political. Writing poetry can be an act of speaking minimally, but conversations can be very garrulous.

KS: If I may interrupt, even my Facebook friends know my minimalist updates. So, my answers will be layered. And I leave it to the audience to unveil the layers—to derive meanings that change with context. Poetry enjoys multiple interpretations, but it is all about truths.

AK: But truths have their own politics. Your truth may not be my truth. Do you envisage some universal truth here? Also, truths are bare, more philosophical than poetic.

KS: I think “truth” isn’t a singular word. It’s always “truths.” There are several truths. What appears as truth to me may not be true to you or others. So, there cannot be a single truth. I remember a critique of my book, *Rituals*, which was featured in *The Critical Flame*. It said, “Sengupta’s poetry is far removed from so-called divine seeking. His poems are more akin to the *Upanishads*—they observe, analyse, probe deeper into the very essence of phenomena, and then raise questions that remarkably look out for truths. I say truths and not The Truth because Sengupta is aware that there exists not a single truth, but multiple meanings that can be drawn from the essence of our reality.”

AK: Does your commitment to truth liberate you from the obligation of poetic aesthetics? Truth could be very blunt.

KS: Truths are non-aesthetic. Commonly, they are ugly. So, you cannot craft a poem aesthetically if you are dealing with the spectacle of life, society, or a human being. But, there comes craftsmanship—you have to create and fabricate a particular form that should read and look decent. Poetry is also a form to look at, observe, and explore. I am blessed with a few mentors. They are the ones who keep telling me, “Work on your language, work on your craft. You have a voice. But remember, poetry is not all about your voice.”

AK: You refer to mentors. How intimate is your relationship with Tagore? Do you cherish the overarching influence of Tagore on Bengali imagination?

KS: I am hugely influenced by the unputdownable Rabindranath Tagore, and I don't think I can ever come out of his expanded aura. I am in awe of him. I remember my book, *Healing Waters Floating Lamps*, published in 2015, was dedicated to Tagore, and eventually, it fetched the Tagore Literary Prize in 2018.

AK: My question is slightly different. When you have a towering Tagore on the landscape, it may intimidate the new young budding poets. When a big tree is around, the smaller trees suffer existential crisis. Let me give one instance. In Punjab, we have one very formidable writer Amrita Pritam. And she has been such a huge poet that any woman poet who has written after Amrita Pritam struggles hard to make the mark. She is at once compared with Amrita. So, do you ever have this insecurity of being compared to Tagore?

KS: No. I write in English. That's my primary language. Tagore is a Bengali lyricist, writer, and poet. He represents an era. There are several prominent Bengali poets. They are not compared to Tagore. As I write in English, the comparison is out of the question.

AK: Besides Tagore, there must be many more influences on you. Bengal has seen the rise of Marxism and then the Naxalite movement. So, when you say mentoring ... is this mentoring as prolific as heterogeneous?

KS: Yes. If you are keen to learn, you can achieve understanding from varied sources. It depends on how focused you are on learning new traits. I firmly believe poetry can hardly be taught or learned in a formal space. So, all that matters is your zeal to mature your craft and voice and your urge to evolve as a poet. My mentors aren't limited to Calcutta; one of my mentors, Sanjeev Sethi, lives in Mumbai.

AK: Who among the contemporary Indian English poets can you call an *influence*? Or let me put it differently—is there any Indian English poet you would like to co-partner with?

KS: Although I have never worked with or collaborated with him on a project, Satya Dash is a poet from Bangalore with whom I would

love to associate. He is one of the finest Indian poets writing in English in our time.

AK: Okay. So, even when it comes to Indian English poetry, don't you think that Calcutta, which had once taken the lead, has fallen behind now as the hub of Indian English poetry? For example, Pritish Nandy's famous poem "Calcutta If You Must Exile Me" almost acquired anthemic proportions.

KS: It's a Kolkata-based love poem, but I'm unsure if Pritish Nandy is considered a Kolkata poet.

AK: You agree that Bombay has been the dominant center of Indian English poetry. Now Bangalore and Delhi are also emerging as the new hubs of poetry. Don't you think Calcutta lost the steam somewhere? You and your publisher Hawakal seem to bring Calcutta back into the poetry scene. What is your assessment?

KS: A publisher has limited scope to change the literary map of a particular state or city. It's not feasible to work with all contemporary poets. Calcutta or West Bengal (the state) is marked explicitly for Bengali literature that enjoys a long legacy—a prolific heritage. But if Bengali poetry is not sufficiently translated into English or other foreign languages, it will lose a global audience. As far as Indian poetry in English is concerned, Hawakal has worked with several prominent and emerging Calcutta poets. If I can name a few, Hawakal published Sharmila Ray, a well-known senior poet in the city. Hawakal launched Nikita Parik, a Charles Wallace Fellow (2023) at the University of Stirling (Scotland), among the younger poets. Last year, three Hawakal titles were nominated for the Tagore Literary Prize (2021-22): *The Elegant Nobody* by Jagari Mukherjee, *Osmosis* by Debarshi Mitra, and *My City is a Murder of Crows* by Nikita Parik. Among them, Jagari and Nikita are young Calcutta poets. Also, Sufia Khatoon's *Death in the Holy Month* was nominated for the Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar in 2020 and again in 2022. So, there is no dearth of competent poets writing in English in Calcutta. This year, at the New Delhi World Book Fair, Hawakal launched Rajorshi Patranabis's *The Last Drop of Your Tears*, supposedly the world's first-ever book of gogyokha poems in English

by a single author. Rajorshi is a Calcutta poet. I hope you understand the marked indifference to Calcutta poets writing in English. Sad but true!

AK: I was talking about the near absence of Bengali poets in Indian English poetry.

KS: I can name quite a few poets from Calcutta. You must be aware of Sanjukta Dasgupta, one of your senior colleagues. Hawakal released three of her significant poetry books: *Lakshmi Unbound* (March 2017), *Sita's Sisters* (November 2019), and *Indomitable Draupadi* (November 2022). Well, I talked about Sharmila Ray before. Other prominent Bengali poets (writing in English) are Gopal Lahiri, Kushal Poddar, Mallika Bhaumik, and Amit Shankar Saha, to name a few. All these poets have their share of critical acclaim. So, there is no shortage of Bengali poets in Indian English poetry.

AK: Look at the contribution of P. Lal and his Writers Workshop. All those poets who later became Bombay poets started with Writer's Workshop. How come the Writers Workshop ended up creating poets outside Calcutta and not in Calcutta?

KS: You are talking about an era when only a handful of Indian poets used to write in English. Also, not many publishers were interested in poetry back then. P. Lal and his Writers Workshop (WW) helped poets from different parts of the country. They approached WW for their books, and Prof. Lal was highly cautious about what he would publish. In those days, WW published a few Calcutta poets as well. However, with the emergence of several independent presses in India and their adherence to state-of-art modern technology, poets outside Calcutta found better avenues to launch their books. As I said before, Calcutta boasts the legacy of Bengali literature, and I wonder if the poets in Calcutta consider it convenient to go out of their comfort zones to showcase their work.

AK: So, when I read your *Water Has Many Colors* and *Rituals*, should I read you as a Bengali English poet or an Indian English poet?

KS: This is an excellent question: I've always maintained—I am a Bengali English poet—no two ways about it. Regardless of my first language in school, my mother tongue is Bangla. I am Bengali by heart, and when I write English poems, they exude my ethnic sensibilities. I was raised in typical Bengali ways in a hardcore Bengali household. Also, my poems often talk about local culture and lifestyle traits. So, I'm more comfortable with a tag of a Bengali English poet than being marked as an Indian English poet.

AK: Are you in a way delimiting your own canvas?

KS: I categorically mentioned my stand in *My Glass of Wine* (2013), one of my initial books. It becomes my duty as a writer to make readers aware of Bengali culture. It's been spontaneous on my part; I never deliberately tried to demarcate my canvas. In a recent interview, fellow poet, translator, and publisher (founder of Red River) Dibyajyoti Sarma said, "Personally, for me, I think, I write Assamese poetry in English. Apart from the language, my aesthetics is influenced by the Assamese poets that I read growing up, those who inspired me to write poetry."

AK: So, the water that flows in the poetry is the Ganga that flows in Bengal and not the rest of Ganga that flows throughout North India? How do you then demarcate your water? When you give your poetry a regional veneer or circumscribe it within regional coordinates, are you not reducing the shades and stretch of water?

KS: If you are religious, you show the same honor to the Ganges regardless of the location. But when you consider the Ganges merely as a river—an uninterrupted flow of water—it isn't the same across its path. Water tends to absorb the earth's color, odor, and properties it passes over. Can you deny that? So, when I focus on regional nuance, I don't curtail the shades and stretch of the water, as you hinted. On the contrary, I work on adding to its depth. When you read my poem, "Game," you will find my take on *Sindur Khela*, a tradition married women observe on the final day of Durga Puja—*Bijaya Dashami*. Let me read the poem; it's on page 89:

*Women arrive
with a pot of vermillion
as the goddess departs.*

AK: We may have variants of this ritual in Ganesh Chaturthi ... in Ganesh Visarjan, and that way, this game is a pan-Indian game.

KS: Of course, it is relevant across the country. But who said *Sindur Khela* was confined within Bengal? The ritual is observed with the same gusto worldwide—anywhere Durga Puja is celebrated. Most interestingly, unmarried women and men (to an extent) participate in this act of bidding adieu to goddess Durga nowadays.

AK: So, you reiterated that you tend to speak less. But you have not talked that less.

KS: I don't speak much on stage, as I said before. But when the questions were plenty, you ought to speak more than you expected.

AK: Okay. But your poems are very laconic in that sense and very terse. So, there is, in a way, a definitive sharpness to the idiom. If you look at it from another angle, there must be a sustained play of the metaphor. After all, single-liners are good occasionally, but if it becomes a habit, as it becomes a habit in your case, the fun of playing with the metaphor is short-circuited.

KS: There are four or five monostichs in *Water Has Many Colors*. Monostich is just another form. Oh well, I'm not addicted to it. Poetry is essentially the condensation of thought. I should try prose if I cannot express myself in fewer words. That's a safe bet!

AK: That's true. Condensation is alright, but would then silence be your last poem?

KS: Poets appreciate silence more than anything. It is worldly as well as divine. Silence speaks to you in quietude. I wish I could write silence someday. Another monostich, maybe. Who knows? (Everyone laughing)

AK: So, because when I read these short arrow-sharp poems, they hit hard. And some of them actually talk back to you, and you then reflect over and give it its possible length as a co-creative reader. But, sometimes, you feel that the poetic endeavor is left abandoned mid-way.

KS: It is hard to say where you can find poetry. Does it dwell in the lines of a poem, or the lines not written but readers can make out? To me, poetry lies in the aroma of the lines, the images readers build upon the poem they read, and the air of the words, which strikes a chord. Hearing that some of my poems talk back to you is satisfying. And it is even more critical that you make that effort to reflect on my lines. What more can I expect from my reader? As Paul Valery said, “A poem is never finished, only abandoned.” Do you think one can quickly become a poetry reader? We must remember we aren’t dealing with newspapers: you wake up one fine morning and start reading the front page, randomly surfing through the headlines. Reading poetry isn’t a cakewalk: it takes discipline, practice, time, and perseverance. That is why we call them “initiated” readers.

The monostich poems I included in *Water Has Many Colors* were first published in *Dreich* magazine (Scotland). When Jack Caradoc, the editor, accepted these pieces, I was pleasantly surprised, for those were the first few single-line verses I had written. Please allow me to read a few monostichs. I’ll begin with “Prayer” on page 59:

What if I am mute or loud?

Prayer manifests your faith—an expression of your desires or wishes. So, it hardly matters if one is soundless or vocal.

The next monostich is “Covid-19” on page 61:

Breathing banks on black market.

We are now aware of the Covid-19 virus and how it affects the respiratory system of otherwise healthy individuals leading them to an acute condition of breathlessness. I remember how many patients in India suffered severely from the shortage of oxygen cylinders sold at an exorbitant price. Indian government couldn’t relax the crisis. On

the other hand, the pandemic situation helped grow brokers and agents who negotiated life for a fee. Moreover, the sound effect of this monostich—placing three words that begin with a 'B'—may excite the eardrum when read aloud.

I expanded my views on the pandemic in “Celebrations” on page 65:

Zero tolerance for outdoor missions.

Remember our time during the complete lockdown phases—“Stay home. Stay safe.”—was the official slogan the World Health Organization and local administration propagated. We weren’t even allowed to venture outside. Remaining confined within the four walls of the house—the so-called “social distancing” took a toll. It badly influenced our mental health. “Celebrations” bears a hint of sarcasm.

AK: Even otherwise, because when you write two-liners or three-liners, why don’t you try the standard forms like haiku, quatrain, and sonnet?

KS: I tried sonnets. I wasn’t happy; the sense was lost somewhere in the form. Although haiku isn’t my domain, I’ve written a few that are awaiting publication. Free verses are also a standard pattern; formlessness is also a form. As far as monostich is concerned, writing one isn’t easy. It’s a different ballgame altogether.

AK: Because, if you look at Indian English poetry, particularly from 2020 onwards, poets use forms with precision and confidence. Ghazal is, for instance, a new craze. Classical ghazal is very subdued; there is no loud voice. What about Agha Shahid Ali? I hope you appreciate his art of writing the ghazals.

KS: Agha Shahid Ali identified himself as an American poet. His contribution to ghazals is considered exemplary. However, is English the language for writing ghazals? Ghazal, as I perceive it, sounds better in Urdu and Hindi. But wait, I am not an expert; my comments may stir up controversy.

AK: But in your book, I noticed that the single-liners or the otherwise minimalistic poems, as it is called, have an architecture to them, and you create some reversals. For instance, instead of you looking like your father, your father looks like you. There is a poem where you say, "Pearls find a way / back to the oysters." In another verse, you write, "Strays recognize the regulars."

KS: I don't create them deliberately. They arrive, and later, I fine-tune them to fit into my poems. Editing poetry is challenging. All my poems pass through several finishing rounds before I present them to the world. One of my mentors, Ranadeb Dasgupta, advised me long ago: "Ensure that the veil you employ isn't opaque and it should allow your readers to see through it." Again, Sanjeev Sethi points at the language, crafting, and, most importantly, eloquence. Their suggestions helped my work mature and backed my evolution as a poet.

AK: And I said that there are reversals, paradoxes, and ironies. You change the sequence of time, what comes later comes first, and what should have come towards the end, comes right at the beginning. Can poetry work otherwise? Is this the very innate nature of your poems? Poetry as a form itself. How else would you write a poem if you don't bring in ironies and paradoxes?

KS: Are you pointing at my diction? My style? My voice? As I said before, I never write a poem for the heck of it. If it does not arrive spontaneously, I would refrain myself from writing a single line. I write little, and I have a purpose when I write poetry. I can't write aimlessly. My poetry should raise questions; it should make you look at ironies and paradoxes with fresh eyes, which you may have considered trivial. My poems should add perspectives.

AK: I am simply stunned by the deft reversals that you bring in phrases like "Slumber unfolds its arms as it wakes up."

KS: I am not a linguist. Nor do I intend to juggle words. It's the end of your sleep cycle when you wake up in bed. But, as I said, my poem must allow you to envision an act from a fresh angle.

AK: Poetry can afford to postpone the union of the soul or the super soul. But what is more important is its tryst with the mundane. In your poems, you do engage with the mundane, but there is always an anxiety to discover the classic in this mundane.

KS: I find mundane affairs timeless. Be it the resonance my mother's bangles create, the silence my wife maintains as I argue with her, or my routine advice to my son as he falls from his bicycle, there is classicality in them. Please allow me to read from "Classic." It's a long piece comprising seven short verses. These poems aren't connected with each other, but they will share my understanding of perennialism.

The first verse in the series is "Ma" on page 69:

*In the kitchen,
her bangles
play a carillon.*

The second verse is titled "Missus" on page 71:

*My falling-out
fails to furcate.*

Her silence, the shield.

The third poem is "Baba" on page 73:

My son tumbles.

*Get back
on your toes,
I tell him.*

The next piece is "Housekeeper" on page 75:

*Climbing the stairs,
he calls my mother.*

His voice reverberates.

Laundryman is at the door.

AK: As you read these poems, I notice that the entire burden of poetry is on the line you write. There are no sustained symbols or motifs as such to provide you with some solid architecture. What do you say? The opening poem “Spectrum” is all about water and its shades: “Water has many colors / smudging pebbles / along its path.” But after that, the image of water recedes, and other images take over.

KS: Yes, but I chose various poems for *Water Has Many Colors* as they reflect on multiple shades of life.

AK: In “Freehold,” you once again bring the image of water in the form of rain. And you indeed capture the rain-umbrella duality in a playful manner. You have so many terms for the umbrella—“brolly,” “gamp,” “parasol,” and “canopy.” What is the purpose of using these synonyms? In another poem, you use different words for dogs, like “strays,” “mutts,” and “curs.” Is it deliberate?

KS: Of course, that was deliberate. Sanjeev Sethi says, “Readers should also learn new words when they read literature.” He alerts me from repeating the same word in short poems.

AK: There are related graphics in *Rituals*, also. So, do you think this is a practical necessity for your poems?

KS: I like my work to be well-presented. Esthetically, my books should appeal to readers. I’m fond of paintings, sketches, and photographs. So, I handpick them and ensure they blend evenly with the themes and concept notes of the books.

AK: *Rituals* should have been more colorful, no?

KS: *Rituals* (2019) was conceptualized as a book in grayscale. My publisher (Bitan) adhered to it as he produced the book.

AK: You have translated Bengali poets, and their poems have a lot of water and river imagery. In your translated work, *Poem Continuous: Reincarnated Expressions*, which contains poems by Bibhas Roy Chowdhury, the epigraph itself has water as its theme: “I swam across the river while / my body floated away in the water.” Does translation talk back to you?

KS: Yes, they do. However, there is always a conscious attempt on my part to avoid getting influenced by the poetry I translate. My voice is important to me.



The First Eight Saloks of Sheikh Fareed in English Translation

Translation by Gurdeep Singh*

Since, *Shree Guru Granth Sahib* is relevant for spiritual, social, and cultural education for the mankind in contemporary times, therefore Sheikh Fareed's *Saloks* (Holy Verses also known as *Bani*) too are pertinent due to their inclusion in the same holy scripture. In *Shree Guru Granth Sahib Jee*, one hundred and thirty *Saloks* of Sheikh Fareed have been included under the title, ਸਲੋਕ ਸ਼ੇਖ ਫਰੀਦ ਕੇ (*Saloks of Sheikh Fareed*). Khawaja Fareed-ud-din Ganj-i-shakar is the first Punjabi poet whose poetry is available for the people in the recorded form. Therefore, the contemporary people of this region would like avail the chance to peep into the past spiritual, social, and cultural values system and then compare the same with the present one. In the 12th and 13th century A.D., foreign culture started invading the native culture because the dynasty of Prithivi Raj Chuahan had just ended and the regime of Sultans had started gaining a strong hold. This context began to produce a new culture in consequence.

Sheikh Fareed was one of the foremost *Sufi* leaders, who belonged to the *Chisti* order (founded by Khawaja Moin-ud-din Chisti) of the Muslim Mystics (The *Sufis* are also known as the 'Muslim Mystics' of India). Since, *Saloks* of Fareed are included in *Shree Guru Granth Sahib Jee*, they hold a good example of 'composite culture' of India, which might appeal to the people of different religions. The reason behind this apprehension is, that the poetry of Fareed carries those ideas, images, and symbols, which belong to divergent cultures and social traditions of the time. Guru Nanak Dev Jee born after three hundred years from Sheikh Fareed and the Guru selected his *Saloks*, so that the value system could be passed to the next generations. Then, Guru Arjan Dev Jee included in *Guru Granth Sahib* in 1604 A.D.. One may wonder, what was the reason behind the inclusion of the *Saloks*? Why did the four Sikh Gurus, Guru Nanak Dev Jee, Guru

* Associate Professor of English at Sikh National College, Qadian

Amar Das Jee, Guru Ram Das Jee, and Guru Arjan Dev Jee had to include their 18 *Saloks* to fine tune the mild coarseness of Fareed's *Saloks*? Perhaps, the readers would like to know the answers.

For the present publication, the first seventeen *Saloks* of Fareed have been selected because the first one begins with the idea of 'death' and the 17th one ends with the same thought. In between, the all other *Saloks*, from 2 to 16 present different ideas about wisely indicating the modes to lead the life in jovial ways. Thus, an unmarked circle seemingly gets completed with these seventeen *Saloks*. The first *Salok* of the list decodes the mystery and experiences of an individual's mind, body, and soul during the time of death. The second and third *Saloks* unfold the state of confusion which arises due to personal and worldly reasons. The *Saloks* from four to seven explicate different strands of *Sufi* wisdom, suggesting some dos and don'ts in connection to the spiritual advances and social smoothness. The *Saloks* from eight to eleven unfold the personal regrets, which obstruct the poet to meet his *Beloved Lord* or Master, often eulogised as the 'Husband', and 'Sai' in his poetry. The twelfth *Salok* might have appeared a coarse one, therefore the same has been smoothed in the thirteenth one by the third Guru, Guru Amardas Jee. The fourteenth and fifteenth *Saloks* explicate about the tragic fate of those who did not live appropriately during their life time. The sixteenth and seventeenth *Saloks*, through the metaphors of 'weed' and 'dust' teach us to be humble, so that we could reach the pinnacle of humanity and spirituality.

ਸਲੋਕ ਸ਼ੇਖ ਫਰੀਦ ਕੇ

Saloks of Sheikh Fareed

ੴ ਸਤਿਗੁਰ ਪ੍ਰਸਾਦਿ ॥

1/Aum/ the Doer; By the True Guru's Grace.

1. ਜਿਤ ਦਿਹੜੈ ਧਨ ਵਰੀ ਸਾਚੇ ਲਏ ਲਿਖਾਇ ॥

ਮਲਕੁ ਜਿ ਕੰਨੀ ਸੁਈਦਾ ਮੁਹੁ ਦੇਖਾਲੇ ਆਇ ॥

ਸਾਹੇ ਲਿਖੇ ਨ ਚਲਨੀ ਜਿੰਦੂ ਕੂੰ ਸਮਝਾਇ ॥

ਜਿੰਦੂ ਵਹੁਟੀ ਮਰਣ ਵਰੁ ਲੈ ਜਾਸੀ ਪਰਣਾਇ ॥

ਆਪਣ ਹਥੀ ਜੋਲਿ ਕੈ ਕੈ ਗਲਿ ਲਗੈ ਧਾਇ ॥

ਵਾਲਹੁ ਨਿਕੀ ਪੁਰਸਲਾਤ ਕੰਨੀ ਨ ਸੁਣੀ ਆਇ ॥

ਫਰੀਦਾ ਕਿੜੀ ਪਵੰਦੀਈ ਖੜਾ ਨ ਆਪੁ ਮੁਹਾਇ ॥ ੧ ॥

1. The marriage time was preordained, the bride was to wed on which day.

‘Malak,’ who had been heard only, arrives, lets Himself display.

By shattering her bones, the hapless soul, It pulls away.

It clarifies the soul, the preordained time can’t slip away.

Marrying the soul, the bride; Death, the Groom will take her away.

Herself handing the soul to Him, who to embrace in wailing way.

The *Puraslat* is narrower than a hair; with your ears, haven’t you heard ! hey?

O Fareed, the warning calls are being given; don’t let yourself be robbed away. 1.

ਜਿਤ ਦਿਹੜੈ ਧਨ ਵਰੀ: The day of the bride’s wedding. ਸਾਹੇ ਲਏ ਲਿਖਾਇ:

The time of marriage was preordained. ਮਲਕੁ: *Malak*: The messenger

of Death, according to Islam. ਜਿ ਕੰਨੀ ਸੁਣੀਦਾ: Who has been heard of.

ਮੁਹੁ ਦੇਖਾਲੇ ਆਇ: Arrives and Appears in person, lets himself

appear/show/displays/reveals ਸਾਹੇ ਲਿਖੇ ਨ ਚਲਨੀ: Preordained

marriage time cannot be avoided/slipped. ਜਿੰਦੁ ਕੁੰ ਸਮਝਾਇ: It explains/clarifies to the soul. ਜਿੰਦੁ ਵਹੁਟੀ: The soul is the bride. ਮਰਣ ਵਰੁ: Dearth is the Groom. ਲੈ ਜਾਸੀ: Takes her away. ਪਰਣਾਇ: After Marrying/After the marriage. ਆਪਣ ਹਥੀ: With her own hands, of her own, handing of her own to. ਜੇਲਿ ਕੈ: Sending/ After sending. ਕੈ ਗਲਿ ਲਗੈ: Who/whom to hug/embrace. ਧਾਇ: wailingly. ਵਾਲਹੁ ਨਿਕੀ: Thinner/ Narrower than a hair. ਪੁਰਸਲਾਤ: *Puraslat*, the bridge to hell. ਕੰਨੀ ਨ ਸੁਣੀ ਆਇ: Haven't you heard with your ears. ਫਰੀਦਾ ਕਿੜੀ: O Fareed, Warnings/warning calls. ਪਵੰਦੀਈ: being given. ਖੜਾ: In carelessness, being inactive, being in standstill position. ਨ ਆਪੁ ਮੁਹਾਇ: Do not let yourself be robbed away.

2. ਫਰੀਦਾ ਦਰ ਦਰਵੇਸੀ ਗਾਖੜੀ ਚਲਾਂ ਦੁਨੀਆਂ ਭਤਿ ॥

ਬੰਨਿ ਉਠਾਈ ਪੇਟਲੀ ਕਿਥੈ ਵੰਞਾ ਘਤਿ ॥ ੨ ॥

2. O Fareed, pinpricked is the godly entrance, I follow the earthly track.

Where should I proceed to dump, the self-sealed and upheld the sack. 2.

ਦਰ: Entry, Entrance, Door, Threshold. ਦਰਵੇਸੀ: Saintly, godly, Pious. ਗਾਖੜੀ: Full of thorns, Pinpricked, Riddled with thorns, Tough. ਚਲਾਂ: I move, I follow, I observe, I tread. ਦੁਨੀਆਂ ਭਤਿ: As others do, like others, According to the old experiences, like the ways of the world. ਬੰਨਿ ਉਠਾਈ: Personally Tied and upheld, Self-fastened and carried, Self-sealed and upheld. ਪੇਟਲੀ: Bag, Sack, Small bundle. ਕਿਥੈ ਵੰਞਾ ਘਤਿ: where to go to discard, where to move to get rid of, where to move to dump, to proceed to discard or dump.

3. ਕਿਝੁ ਨਾ ਬੁਝੈ ਕਿਝੁ ਨਾ ਸੁਝੈ ਦੁਨੀਆ ਗੁਝੀ ਭਾਹਿ ॥

ਸਾਈਂ ਮੇਰੇ ਚੰਗਾ ਕੀਤਾ ਨਾਹੀ ਤ ਹੰ ਭੀ ਦਝਾਂ ਆਹਿ ॥ ੩ ॥

3. To me infers nothing, occurs nothing, the world is a fire arcane.

My Lord graced me or else, I would have been burning in pain.

ਕਿਝੁ ਨ ਬੁਝੈ: Nothing resolves, Nothing is comprehensive/ No clue is found, nothing infers. ਕਿਝੁ ਨਾ ਸੁਝੈ: I cannot solve, nothing occurs. ਦੁਨੀਆ: This world/The world. ਗੁਝੀ is a mysterious/arcane/incomprehensible. ਭਾਹਿ: fire/energy. ਸਾਈਂ ਮੇਰੇ: Lord of mine/My Lord. ਚੰਗਾ ਕੀਤਾ: Did well/better/best. ਨਾਹੀ ਤ: Otherwise. ਹੰ ਭੀ: I too/also. ਦਝਾਂ ਆਹਿ: Burn in pain/Suffer, Burn/Smolder hot and red in pain.

4. ਫਰੀਦਾ ਜੇ ਜਾਣਾ ਤਿਲ ਥੋੜੜੇ ਸਮੰਲਿ ਬੁਰੁ ਭਰੀ ॥

ਜੇ ਜਾਣਾ ਸਹੁ ਨੰਢੜਾ ਤਾਂ ਥੋੜਾ ਮਾਣੁ ਕਰੀ ॥ ੪ ॥

4. O Fareed, if I knew, the sesame were few, I could hand-pick them on qui vive.

I would have been not so prideful, had I known that my Lord Husband is a naïve. 4.

ਤਿਲ: Sesame; ਥੋੜੜੇ – Not Many, Less, a few ; ਸਮੰਲਿ – carefully, cautiously, mindfully, on the qui vive; ਸਹੁ – Husband, Lord, Man, Groom ; ਥੋੜਾ – less ; ਮਾਣੁ ਕਰੀ – Be proud of, show arrogance, egoistic, to give oneself airs.

5. ਜੇ ਜਾਣਾ ਲੜੁ ਛਿਜਣਾ ਪੀਡੀ ਪਾਈ ਗੰਢ ॥

ਤੈ ਜੇਵਡ ਮੈ ਨਾਹਿ ਕੇ ਸਭੁ ਜਗੁ ਡਿਠਾ ਹੰਡਿ ॥੫॥

5. O Fareed, if I knew, the bridal ties would wear out, I would have tightened the knot.

No one I have found like You, Lord, the whole world I have seen and sought. 5.

ਜੇ ਜਾਣਾ: If I knew, had I known. ਲੜ: The end corner of the noosed bridal cloth, lose or hanging noosed end, the bridal knot is metaphor for bridal ties. ਛਿਜਣਾ: Wear out, Wear thin. ਪੀਡੀ ਗੰਢ ਪਾਉਣਾ : Tightened the knot or noose. ਤੈ ਜੇਵਡ: Great, Grand, Benevolent, Bounty like You (God, Lord), ਮੈ ਨਾਹਿ ਕੇ: No one is there, for me, to me. ਸਭ ਜਗੁ ਡਿਠਾ ਹੰਡਿ: The whole/all world I have searched out, looked out, experienced, known, sought out.

6. ਫਰੀਦਾ ਜੇ ਤੂ ਅਕਲ ਲਤੀਫ ਕਾਲੇ ਲਿਖੁ ਨ ਲੇਖ ॥

ਆਪਨੜੇ ਗਿਰੀਵਾਨ ਮਹਿ ਸਿਰੁ ਨੀਵਾਂ ਕਰਿ ਦੇਖੁ ॥੬॥

6. O Fareed, if subtle astute you are, then don't pen the letters of third-rate.

Lower your head first and look deep into your inner-self's state. 6.

ਫਰੀਦਾ: O Fareed. ਜੇ ਤੂ: If you. ਅਕਲ ਲਤੀਫ: are a subtle/keenly/thoroughly astute/wise. ਕਾਲੇ ਲਿਖੁ: Black marks, words spoiling reputation, third-rate letters. ਨ ਲੇਖ: Do not write/scribe/pen. ਆਪਨੜੇ ਗਿਰੀਵਾਨ ਮਹਿ: Inside of yours, inside the inner-self. ਸਿਰੁ ਨੀਵਾਂ ਕਰਿ ਦੇਖੁ: Bowing/lowering your head first, deeply observe/look/scan/see, deeply see/scan/observe/look at your own state of being.

7. ਫਰੀਦਾ ਜੋ ਤੈ ਮਾਰਨਿ ਮੁਕੀਆਂ ਤਿਨ੍ਹਾ ਨਾ ਮਾਰੇ ਘੁੰਮਿ ॥

ਆਪਨੜੈ ਘਰਿ ਜਾਈਐ ਪੈਰ ਤਿਨ੍ਹਾ ਦੇ ਚੁੰਮਿ ॥ ੭ ॥

7. O Fareed, those who punch you, don't punch them in consequence.

Arriving at your house, hold the feet of those one in high reverence. 7.

Or

O Fareed, don't hit them back, to you who rain blows.

Arriving at your home, worship the steps of those. 7.

ਫਰੀਦਾ: O Freed. ਜੋ: Those who. ਤੈ: to you. ਮਾਰਨਿ ਮੁਕੀਆਂ: Punch, hit with fist blows. ਤਿਨ੍ਹਾ: to them. ਨਾ ਮਾਰੇ ਘੁੰਮਿ: do not punch/hit back/ in turn/consequence. ਆਪਨੜੈ ਘਰਿ ਜਾਈਐ: Arriving/reaching at your house/home. ਪੈਰ ਤਿਨ੍ਹਾ ਦੇ ਚੁੰਮਿ: Kiss the feet of those, worship the steps of those.

8. ਫਰੀਦਾ ਜਾਂ ਤਉ ਖਟਣ ਵੇਲ ਤਾਂ ਤੂ ਰਤਾ ਦੁਨੀ ਸਿਉ ॥

ਮਰਗ ਸਵਾਈ ਨੀਹਿ ਜਾਂ ਭਰਿਆ ਤਾਂ ਲਦਿਆ ॥ ੮ ॥

8. O Fareed, when you had time for divine gain, you were absorbed in worldly affairs then.

Now death has held the strong foot; just as the load is full, just then it is taken away. 8.

ਫਰੀਦਾ: O Fareed. ਜਾਂ: When. ਤਉ: You. ਖਟਣ ਵੇਲ: had time for divine gain. ਤਾਂ: Then. ਤੂ: you. ਰਤਾ ਦੁਨੀ ਸਿਉ: were engrossed/absorbed in worldly affairs. ਮਰਗ: Death. ਸਵਾਈ ਨੀਹਿ: To hold/have a strong

foot/firm base. ਜਾਂ: Just as. ਭਰਿਆ: The load is full. ਤਾਂ: Just then.
ਲਦਿਆ: is taken away.

Note:-

In *Shree Guru Granth Sahib Jee*, One hundred and thirty *Saloks* (130) under the *Bani* (Holy) '*Saloks of Shaykh Fareed Jee*', 18 *Saloks* belong to the revered Sikh Gurus. The detail of these 18 *Saloks* is as below:

Among these, 4 *Saloks* (*Shalok* No. 32, 113, 120, 124) belong to Guru Nanak Dev Jee.

5 *Saloks* (*Shalok* No: 13,52,104,122, 123) belong to Amar Das Jee.

1 *Shalok* (*Shalok* No.: 121) belongs to Guru Ram Das Jee.

8 *Saloks* (*Shalok* No.: 75,82,83,105,108 to 111) belong to Guru Arjan Dev Jee.



He was a Good Man

Kinshuk Gupta^{*}

Translation by Manika Arora^{**}

I

The Buddha in Kartik's dream was not the pure white marble Buddha he had seen in the Professor's room. It was mottled. His white stocky body was covered with thick, black, granular rashes. It did not have the tranquil gaze, the calm presence and the enchanting spark of enlightenment in the eyes, it looked deformed and green, the green of putrefaction. The green and black grew darker. The white was fading away when he awoke with a start. The left side of his head hurt intensely. Sleep still filled his eyes. One end of the blue polka dotted quilt he had used at night covered his legs the other end lay crumpled on the floor. His phone plugged in for recharge rang insistently.

Chachi - the screen told him.

What, all of a sudden, had brought him to her mind today...and why? Annoyed, he turned the phone face down.

When it rang again he took the call irritably.

Hearing no sound from the other end for a while he said 'hello, who is this,' a little harshly intending to disconnect the call. Just when he was about to disconnect the thin voice of Chachi floated in like a thread of silk. "Babaji ...has left us"

"What! Where did he go?" His voice was still deliberately rude. Then, he was taken aback. Various snippets from the conversations at home from the last week buzzed in his ears. Babaji's image sprang to his mind-his body like pine-wood, his perforated yellowing banyan

^{*} Doctor, bilingual writer, poet, and translator based in New Delhi

^{**} Assistant Professor, Mehr Chand Mahajan, DAV College for Women, Chandigarh.

the toothless mouth like a sucked out mango, vicious mother-sister abuses on his tongue, a sharp knife in hand. But a prone figure not upright. Eyes closed. Nostrils closed with cotton balls like corks on a soda bottle. He sat up on his bed with a thump.

“Kartik.... Kartik, are you okay, child?” Chachi was pushing out words from a choked throat.

“So suddenly.... Papa told me the day before yesterday that it was only low sodium...” Kartik replied sorrowfully.

“He had a heart attack last night. I even asked if I should come. But your father doesn’t let others have their way.” Chacha was on the line speaking in a flow.

“He must be trying to not trouble you. I see several patients here who recover even after two attacks. What did he know that this soon....” The strong connection of blood made him say it.

“Anyways, my child! It wasn’t my fate to see my father towards the end... we will get to your hostel in ten minutes... get ready soon...”

Kartik took a deep breath. Like the steam puffing out of his mouth memories began to get foggy. When he was a kid, Babaji used to pick him up from the bus stop. Wearing his woollen cap, even in the heat of July, with the sun at its peak, eating slices of apple that he cut with the knife. Whenever anyone pestered him or even tried to do so, Babaji would threaten them waving the knife- If anyone says a word against my Karti I will chop off their ears.

Maa often told him that when he was a kid, he would start screaming at five “Babaji, I have come....Babaji ..I have come” And placing him on his shoulders, Babaji would take him on long walks in the park. He sat him on swings, played hide and seek, catch and run with him. Brushing his teeth with the twig of the neem, chewing on the leaves of ‘sadabahaar’ to fight ‘diabetes’, the only inheritance of his family.

He felt as if a fountain of tears will break forth from his eyes any minute... But nothing happened. A ball of pain kept tormenting him in the middle of his chest.

The next minute he recalled that he had to pack. He opened the godrej almirah. In the fit of distress, he randomly shoved whatever clothes he could lay his hands on. He heard the honking of the car outside and the feet began to walk. His mind was lost somewhere else.

II

There was an old familiar smell of fuel in Chacha's car. A golden photo frame of Guru Maharaj in his white robe. The driver switched on the blower as soon as he entered the car. Chacha was sitting next to the driver in front. His hennaed hair had white and orange strands. A locket of Guru Maharaj in his hands, and rexine shoes instead of leather on his feet as instructed by Guruji. No response to Kartik's greetings. Chachi in her square frame glasses nodded.

A while later, as they neared I.S.B.T, Chacha said grumpily, "You could have changed the shirt in the least."

"What?... Did you say something to me?" Looking outside the window, Kartik asked absent mindedly "What happened?"

"You don't wear red when someone dies, beta ji!" said the driver in his cab driver's blue uniform grinning at him in the rear view mirror. "Change your shirt the moment you get home." Chacha dictated.

Kartik said nothing. He began staring out the window again gnashing his teeth.

He was surprised that grief had not swept over them enough to make them overlook the colour of his shirt. But pain had loosened its clutches on his chest as well. He had grown bigger and Babaji got dwarfed before the new needs that sprouted in him. Their relationship had shrunk to checking on each other. Or he would tell him which brother of Dadi borrowed money from him on which day of which month in which year and hadn't returned it despite many letters of

reminder. Or which daughter of which Bua, with that spot on her forehead and who wore cut-sleeve blouses (I was so dumb, ... I should have guessed at her waywardness) had spread herself like a carpet for the sake of getting a son-in-law..

Had it only been about needs turning into un-needs or about the ruthless hands of age crushing his bones, Babaji would have become a Liliputian but at least, he would still have existed for him. It was the foulest of abuses that he hurled at Dadi ever since Kartik was small, so small that even calling someone a 'dog' felt like a crime to him, that did it. It was those letters he had found in the hidden corner of his father's almirah in which words such as, slut, immoral, whore, affair, affair, affair were written repeatedly like someone learning a new language would do for practice (that his father had snatched away as if it were a lump of burning coal). It was in the winter vacation of his second year college when Babaji had threatened Dadi with his hand raised against her as she sat sunning herself that had made him want to hurl the potted plant nearby at his head that did it.

"Well, it is all for good..." Chachi was about to say something. She stopped abruptly.

"What for the good? ... we were ready ... to get him treated here...Money was never a concern". Chacha interjected.

"Not everything is about money, Vighnesh... also about the patient's pain... there is an exhaustion of hopelessness as well...what I have learnt after losing my father that breathing on a ventilator is so meaningless ..."

"Everyone has only one father"

Once again silence squatted in the car. Kartik did not know how to remember Babaji. When he first heard the news, the pain had felt like a cat's claw that held him like fluttering pigeon in its a grip. He hadn't even remembered even a bit of all that was rotten in Babaji. But now as time passed by and he was getting closer to Babaji, all those stories came back to him in which Babaji was a cruel father or a husband. Although, he loved Kartik a lot but how could he forget that he

eclipsed the life of the one woman Kartik loved the most. He thought of his grandmother. He was about to call her. He dialled the number. Then he disconnected. He doesn't know how to face her.

What will he say? It is bad that he left or it is for the good that he went away with such ease. That he is happy that the eclipse of Dadi's life was finally over. Or that he was unhappy that he did not suffer at all in dying like he did not suffer in his life.

"They will have only a hawan, right?" He addressed his Chachi after moments of silence.

"Whatever your father says... I said we should get Guru Maharaj's hawan done...why have other frills? Chacha replied instantly.

"Guruji's Hawan..." Kartik raised his eyebrows but said nothing.

It was almost twelve and he hadn't eaten anything since morning. In fact, he had hardly been able to swallow any food last night. He was about to have a spoonful of dal chawal when the damp odour of urine mixed with semen emanating from the thighs of the professor, hit him and he threw up. Nothing...no no, nothing happened with the professor... it was consensual...his mistake that he had gone to him...whatever happened had happened, what was the point of thinking about it now....

He closed his eyes. He was sure that whether anyone else understood him or not, his father and Dadi have immense sensibility. They would understand, his love, the palpitations of his heart. They will hold his hand firmly and tell him that this is only a phase of life, the early 20's are whirly like this, and he would start to feel that it is possible for him to lead an ordinary life.

As he came out gasping from the professor's room, he was filled with clamminess. He felt that he was not a human but only a body, a young body, a warm young body. He had only gone to talk to the professor. To understand himself and his attraction for the other. How will he spend his life all alone and without love.. But before he could say anything, the professor sitting beside him had started kissing him. It was not like his body wasn't aroused by the touch of the professor's

soggy lips. It felt like someone had touched the strings of an old veena rusted and gathering fungus, with his masterly fingers. Just sit quietly, I will do whatever is needed. You just enjoy it, the Professor had whispered in his ear. The sensation in his ears vibrated his whole being. A hurricane began gathering in his body.

Once again his stomach growled with hunger. He wanted to tell his Chacha to make the car stop at some shop where he could at least buy some snacks, but in front of this large void of death the grumpiness of his hunger had no significance even if the colour of his shirt did.

III

The same silence reigned in the house. Silence that was customary, that had social etiquette, that had monotony, the way he had felt in the car for four hours. All faces downcast, eyes welling up with tears, delirium in every voice. No red bindi on Dadi's forehead, no bangle on his mother's wrist.

The red sofas of the drawing room, covered with the slovenly white sheet, were moved to the corner. Mattresses were spread on the floor in the middle, covered with the gaudiness of white. On them were seated the women from the neighbourhood and his father's friends.

Surrounded by them sat Dadi. Narrating the sequence of episodes. Twice. Thrice...

He was fine last night... in fact, he walked to the hospital himself...had attack there...Babbu told me only in the morning.

He was a good man....clad in suits and sarees, handkerchiefs in their hands embroidered with flowers, their sandals going clackety clack, groups of women trooped in and repeat the same narration melodramatically- Saw him walking yesterday, fetching milk in pail, at the tea stall in the corner...then suddenly... simply unbelievable. He was a good man.

Dadi responded to their curiosity with the same theatricality... really difficult to believe. Yesterday, he cooked his dal himself. Never had

any salty-spicy food. Never put even a single grain of sugar in his mouth. He was perfectly well till last night...and then, the same sequence ending in the same refrain ...he was a good man. Whenever Dadi found that the women were satisfied with her reasoning and her pitiful voice, she would gather the residues of her self-confidence, and not forget to add cautiously in an undertone - he was a good man...for his brothers, children and grandsons.

Kartik felt irritated. What's the need of this futile drama? Pain is not some sweet milky tea that one can down in a gulp; pain is a cup of poison that one has to hold in the throat, because there is no alternative to swallowing it and one does not have the courage to let it mingle with blood and flow in the arteries.. Why not simply hang a placard outside the door narrating the event of death (and not forget to mention that he was a good man) and that would be that. Even better, circulate a whatsapp message with all the details. RIP and Om Shanti, anyhow, are trending these days. The work will be done easily and it will save unnecessary waste of energy.

Death in his imagination was different: Like a celebration, a plaintive symphony being played on a violin, only four-five very close people will be present. Those who want to cry would have the freedom to cry. Those who want to laugh would laugh. Those who wanted to sit quietly would sit still and immobile. Experiencing comfortable silence. Illuminated with the blue enchanting glow of grief. Throbbing with heartbeats. And everyone will remember the one who has left - like a full human, in each shade of life. Only through such deep grief would they find salvation.

Dadi was wearing a baby pink suit. Without worrying about the women around, he stood in front of her. She saw his clenched fists with a side glance, then signalled to him to go to his room. When he kept standing there, a wave of gossip spread in the group of women —kids these days...care two hoots...so what if he is a doctor...to hell with customs, sanskar...look how they change the moment they step out...look at him with earphones plucked ...wearing a red shirt too...Oh my, kids these days...when the whispers started Dadi said sternly, “You go to your room”.

Stung, he remained standing there.
Looking at him standing there, Dadi's voice took on the sharpness of shards of glass, "Go! Didn't I tell you..."

He was stunned. Dadi perhaps wanted to remain sunk in the pit of vulgarity he was trying to pull her out of. Had she herself forgotten the abacus of liberation she had herself taught the girls in her college such long years ago and accepted darkness as the reality of her life?
IV

His mother was perched on a heating pad on her bed. Cream coloured socks on her feet. Boy-cut hair. Busy prescribing medicines to her patients in the hospital on the phone. She also explained to them that she will be in her OPD only a week from now.

"Why a week?...I thought only hawan ...as it was at Shalini Mausi's"

"That was a young death. That too of a daughter-in-law. On top of it she had died of cancer. For them winding up with a hawan was easy...papa has lived a full life...no one will agree."

"Isn't that even better... no risk of him haunting the next generation as a ghost of a discontent soul ..." Kartik said a little sarcastically.

"No, my son...why are you talking like this? ...He used to do so much for you...when you were a kid.."

"So...maa, these hypocrisies will do nothing more than filling up the bellies and pockets of the pandits."

"They help the departed soul rest in peace"

"The one who didn't let anyone live in peace all his life, you think, he will find peace this easily. Did he spare anybody ever...from the nurses below to the people working at the top...even Dadi's family...your family...created scenes at each festival...don't you remember last Diwali..." Kartik's voice was rose in its pitch.

"What is the point of accusing him now?"

“You can say it so easily because you didn’t have to suffer anything...”

“The one you have given a clean chit to has been no paragon either. You don’t know this but I have seen how she used to scream at him. For the last one week babuji had been ill, I had been asking her to make kachori for papa but would she do it... . Look at her audacity. It takes two to clap...”

“Do you even understand what you are saying?”

“You are still a child...don’t you see how your father and I compromise perfectly...when one is angry the other keeps quiet...”

“When does papa abuse you or your family...when has he handed out your character certificates?”

“Why go on like a stuck needle...one should let bygones be bygones. Forgive and Forget.”

“The injured have no forgiveness in them.”

Maa repeated the same words that middle class parents have rehearsed, “You are still a child... will understand gradually” Then added, “Also, what is the point of this futile discussion? Everyone makes their own choices. They should also be ready to live with them.”

“Then what’s a family for?” Asked Kartik but ignoring him, maa busied herself in her mobile and her patients.

Just then, father entered the room in his dust coloured tracksuit. Ignoring his “hi, papa” he started chiding maa, “Give some attention to those outside. His Chachi is talking to the guests and here you are.” Maa kept her phone aside to hear him out but as soon he stopped talking, she busied herself with the phone again.

When his father had no influence his mother he turned to Kartik. Bloodshot veins in his eyes, sweat on the wrinkles of his forehead, his hair messy and dishevelled “Have you seen Baba ji?” he asked pointing towards the outer room.

“No... I won’t be able to see”

“You won’t have your say in everything. Go see... seek his blessings”

“The man who did nothing good for anyone, what good will his blessings do?” Kartik’s anger was at its peak.

“You only know Dadi’s side. You know father gave away our share of land. You know why...because his younger brother needed it. He had lost his job, his children were growing up...in our household we were both employed.”

“If you start talking of intentions even a rapist would not be at fault...if he does not get it at home he looks for it outside...pouncing on anyone...” suddenly Kartik felt that he was talking about himself. He fell silent awkwardly. He continued after a while, “You couldn’t pursue D.N.B because of all these bickerings ... how will you justify that?”

“What...D.N.B....when babbu?” Chacha entered the room with Baba’s locket swinging around his neck.

“What is the point of digging old graves? And let’s suppose that I had done that D.N.B. ... and had settled in Delhi...would that have changed anything significantly? Everything would have remained almost the same...all this is fate”

“Only pessimists are such fatalists” Kartik thought but said nothing.

“You don’t even want to understand. You always think about rights ... it doesn’t work like that in a family...”

“Poor man! He did so much for his siblings...in spite of that, he endured insults. He told me on the phone to ask my maa to cook kachori for him...” Chacha said clearing his throat.

“Arre bhaiya...so many times I said that...so many times he did...but her audacity...” Maa joined the argument in her theatrical style.

“That man made her life hell and you wanted her to also cook puri-kachoris for him... wah... wah! What kind of justice is that!” Kartik screamed.

“If she was that unhappy, she should have left him way earlier. Our lives would have had some less drama,” Maa twitched her eyes.

“Just keep quiet.” Father shouted suddenly that sent shivers down Kartik’s body. “When you don’t know anything, what is the meaning of this unnecessary commentary?” Maa was ready with a tit for tat but when she saw the look of surprise in Chacha’s eye she retreated gnashing her teeth.

Kartik had usually wondered why Dadi didn’t separate from him. Dadi always gave him the same explanation that any ordinary middle-class woman of those days had, that it just wasn’t done those days. It would have been terrible for the children. Or that you had to make a compromise to live anyways so how did it matter whom one made that compromise with. But Dadi wasn’t ordinary—she was educated, worked in a college, earned well, she made almost double of what Babaji did. Then why...

Gradually, he began to think that he won’t tell anyone about the professor. What would he say when he himself hadn’t yet understood himself at which moment the professor’s touch turned from being exciting to disgusting. The way his father is defending Babaji, isn’t it a possibility that he may actually question Kartik contemptuously why he had gone there in the first place... his mistake...hundred percent his...that if he hadn’t aroused the professor had that middle-aged man with a family gone insane to behave like that?

V

Kartik felt like a useless penny. Insignificant and invisible. For his doctor parents he 'existed' only when he won awards at the state or national level quiz competitions. For friends, he 'existed' when they would need him like when they wanted him for cheating at exam time or needed his notebooks for the holiday homework. For society, he 'existed' only once — when he secured admission in a prestigious medical college.

When he walked about in school hugging his books to his chest bouts of laughter from a group of boys behind - taller than him and with denser hair- would lash his back, he just wanted to dissolve like alum disappears in water. When his teachers in the coaching places laughed at his questions he wanted to sink into the ground. In college when he had innocently mispronounced 'gucchi' as 'gussi' people laughed at his rusticity as if he had claimed to be from America instead of India, he wanted to be the invisible man.

Then it occurred to him that if he found people, society, so dated (pixilated) why did he want them to stamp an approval of his existence? When the question raised its head in his head he began to feel that he 'existed' a little for himself. He began to 'exist' a little more for himself year after year as he distanced himself from society. Yesterday it was that 'existence' that the professor had broken with a hammer. Today his own family, his very own people were raining small blows on it to completely pulverize him.

He recalled his conversation with the professor. After the round of the wards, he had sat down to work at his thesis. He had planned to finish four chapters before going to sleep. Just then, the bell of his grinder rang. He answered the call hurriedly. There wasn't any profile picture. Neither was anything written on the profile. After he replied "what's up" to the 'hi', there were a flurry of messages-

You are very close

Wanna have some good time

Are you interested

Tell me

Reply fast

For once he put his phone face down. He never did like such desperate people. Then, there were non-stop messages of 'reply fast'

His heart was beating faster than a generator. He just wrote - Only casually.

There was no response from the professor. He only sent a thumbs-up emoticon. Then, suddenly another message popped up- Now come fast.

Where?

Then that sudden reply - Anaesthesia block, room 418.

In the campus? That too in an office? Could it be a scam? Kartik stopped again.

When he didn't reply anything suddenly the professor messaged- It's safe.

Outside?

Trust me.

An expert in his game, the professor knew how to get hold of these newbies. He then sent 'trust me' messages in a row. When all the fluids of the body began to rage, when desires began to hiss like snakes, what alternative did he have? Calming his racing heart he wrote 'I am coming' and walked to the Professor's room.

He knocked at the Professor's door. Glancing at the name on the black nameplate in a golden frame, he recalled something. Dr. Aviral Ranjan. Arre! Every resident's favourite doctor! He was often abroad

presenting papers on new modes of pain management in different countries. Minds his own business. A totally no-nonsense kind of guy. No toxicity at all.

Thinking of it he felt relaxed. The continuous argument of yes-no, yes-no, yes-no in his mind settled down. By then the door had opened. A man stood in the doorway, average in height in a French beard. He smelt of musk. There was Baby's Tears in a white pot whose delicate leaves he had tried to touch when the professor laid him face down on the table pinning him down with his heavy body. He had pushed away the bust of a pure white marble Buddha throwing it on the floor hoping that someone outside could be warned.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. It was his Mausi in her boy cut hair and maroon Bata slippers. Not his, his father's, Mausi, whose home he used to visit in the summer break with his Dadi. He opened the door, touched her feet half-heartedly, and was about to close the door, when Mausi started saying gesticulating with hands, "Karti, you are a darling son. What happened to you....you don't even want to see your Dadaji's face?"

Before Kartik could assume the tone of a child and say that he is afraid of death the elder Maami, in her belt around the waist, arrived. Following her was the younger Mausi with her neatly arranged flicks. Both had spent their lives bereft of any ideas still managing to differ in opinions. They were ready to beat him with the sticks of their questions – "Red shirt? ...What happened, son?"

Gradually women who were not satisfied with the distasteful story of the death began to gather around. Behind them followed that friend of maa who had a PhD in vocal music, but who had forgotten the difference between Bheempalasi and Bageshwari or Chaiti and Thumri while teaching in a Haryanvi college of girls in a nearby village. Cleverly she began to caress Kartik's head- and said- Beta, don't be upset....those who come have to go at-least don't waste the time you can get with Dadaji.

Kartik removed his red shirt immediately. Not removed- his shaking hands began to work on their own with eagerness.

Pushed ahead by fear his feet began to move on their own as well and didn't stop till he had touched Babaji's feet.

How had Kartik forgotten that even if these fools had no brains their muscles packed a lot of punch.

VI.

He was made to sit inside the room to watch over Babaji's body. The Mausi with boy cut hair who walked with a wiggle and wanted to make an impression with some phrases of English she had committed to memory had whispered in his ears – the body is never left unattended.

Body - what a squishy word. Kartik had goosebumps as if a new light shone on the reality of Babaji's death and it gleamed before him. So, Babaji won't demand poori-kachoris on festivals and festive occasions now? He would never again place his magnifying glass on a news piece on Ayurvedic medicine asking him to read it out. He would never again bother him with the sound of his throat rattling at five in the morning or with his habit of not flushing down his urine in the commode?

He took out Babaji's crumpled photograph from inside the polythene bag on table. Om Prakash Aggarwal. That same woollen cap, dust coloured Nehru jacket, cataracts in his eye. He held on to it like he would a precious gem. Hearing someone come round, he hurriedly slid the photograph into the pocket of his white kurta.

Whenever people lifted the brown flowered blanket from Babaji's body to look at his face Kartik had a glimpse of it. Pale, toothless and scabby. Yellowed like a parchment, mouth open, sunken cheeks. Wisps of white beard. Every time he looked at it, the face would appear to be not his but that of the professor. The shape of his eyes and the sharpness of the nose and also the lips tilting sideways. How

did a face that was so dear come to look so much like that of a stranger?

The way the faces of people in love for a long time begin to look alike, does hatred also leave its marks on faces in the same manner? Whenever a page of Babaji's atrocities opened even by mistake, all the members of the family would turn into statues made of wax. Especially, his father. Provoked by Kartik's grumbling ifs and buts Dadi would once in a while speak up a little. She always said the same things, like how a man thinks of a woman as a galauti kabab, only the episodes varied, the story remained the same. On top of it Dadi had bursts of talent and even earned double of his income. What weapons did the man have to hit her with—except for insults, rudeness, character assassination? Listening to all this, Kartik's heart would be ready to explode like a grenade.

It there was no blast it was only because he had the satisfaction of knowing that nothing physical was involved in it. Then, Dadi would begin to say something in an undertone, his father would be jolted by a shock of 440 volts. He would become restless. Then, he would start to scrape floor with his toenail. Then suddenly he would gather some courage and say glaringly—No, no, nothing of this sort ever happened.

Kartik used to think that physical violence is the worst. Then, why does he feel that the professor with the French beard has raped him when he had actually escaped it. Although, by the skin of his teeth. He had felt the professor's belly moving against his back. The Professor had kept his fingers in Kartik's mouth. He pulled them apart at both ends like a piece of paper. Bending close to his ears, he whinnied like a horse. Kartik could have screamed. He could have screamed. But, he kept lying like a dead body. Taking deep breaths. Surrendering to fate.

It was another thing that just then landline had begun to ring. His hold had weakened. The penis grew flaccid. Kartik ran away. As he ran he won in the eyes of a court and society. But, his heart, his mind, every nerve, each muscle of his being had testified against him. He was **defeated**. Defeated very badly.

VII.

His bewildered father kept standing there. His dwarf like friend with a face of a pahadi potato came in and told him that the pandit he knows has asked for fifteen thousand rupees. The wood, the sandalwood will be 'ours'. The second offer was from one in reebok sandals for twenty thousand all inclusive. The third one wasn't a friend, he was the compounder in the hospital downstairs, but his deal was the cheapest - Doctor sahab, why to waste so much money. Everything will be taken care of in twelve thousand rupees.

His father was standing amidst them with all eyes of people standing around trained on him. Like a kid licking a lollipop father chose the most expensive offer instantly.

The Pandit reached there in ten minutes. Had it not been for his dhoti and tuft, he looked totally like a bodybuilder. Twenty five or twenty six year old, a swelling chest under the white shirt, well toned hairless arms.

He said nothing, silently kneaded flour in a plate and started to make large balls. A mouse of natural attraction tickled Kartik. On the pretext of helping him he stood behind the pandit. A pomegranate of desire exploded in his heart whenever the elbow of the pandit involved in kneading flour touched Kartik in the abdomen unwittingly. He felt as if he was a galloping deer come to a standstill before the headlights of a jeep that carried his hunters. Even then, he would not stop. In spite of the episode with the professor. On the contrary he wished to have been taller, for then the touch would be closer to his legs. Then, instead of one, a thousand pomegranates would have exploded inside him.

The pandit started tying bamboo sticks with a rope to make the bier. Till then, Babaji's sisters had gathered around. Sitting on a durrie in the lobby they had been sobbing for long and had now fallen silent of exhaustion. Looking at the bier, the youngest sister who was also the shortest in height and whose voice was like the horn of a bus started crying again. Hayeee... beer ji has left ...beer ji has left forever. The cry infected everyone like a sneeze. Both elder sisters...then, Kartik's

mother...then, father...joined in as if it was necessary to prove one's intimacy with Babaji in such a vulgar exhibition.

Some people looked at Dadi with expectation in their eyes, the way, a monkey is expected to imitate in a circus, but then, Dadi went inside with an excuse of some work.

He had seen his father crying for the first time. Getting closer, he held his father's hand. He felt as if the father started crying even more bitterly. But the moment the men from neighbourhood began to stare at him father put on his mask of courage again and pushed Kartik away.

Panditji said that Babaji had to be bathed. Almost anyone and everyone gathered in the room. Panditji first poured drops of gangajal in the four corners of the room. Father began to remove the dust coloured kurta. Babaji's hands were getting cold. There was some stiffness too. Kartik remembered Nysten's rule. In twelve hours rigor will set in completely. Then, the body would be stiff like iron.

Chacha loosened the knot and removed the pajama. When he was about to remove the underwear, Kartik felt like throwing everyone out of the room. Whenever he asked patients to open their legs to put a foley in the emergency or asked the others to loosen the knot, even unconscious patients would put up an involuntary resistance to the intrusion on their private parts. With what ease, in front of everyone, his Babaji was being stripped. This was not so different from the violence on the body in the mortuary... the only difference was that here clothes were not being cut open or ripped away but were being removed and those doing this were not the drunken attendants of the morgue but people who knew him.

The sight of Babaji's hippopotamus like penis brought the professor to his mind. When the professor had tired of kissing, he had taken off his belt. With one hand he had pulled his mouth to his penis. Kartik could have stopped there had he wished to. He could have squeezed his lips shut tightly but he hadn't stopped (or couldn't stop). When he put the penis in his mouth the sourish smell of urine, the sickening taste of its skin, the drumming sound of arteries on the surface of the

organ pulsing with blood had made him feel so strange. He had then wanted to stop. But the professor's hand on his head, the penis coming towards him in a fixed rhythm, would not let him go free as if he were a silicon toy to be used any which way.

He stared at the pandit standing close to him with a tattoo of Shiva on his arm. Dreadlocked. A blue Shiva with a snake draped around his neck. He wanted to slide towards him. Wanted to touch his penis. Wanted to place his lips on the taut breasts peeping through the shirt. Wanted to lick the dirty sweat dripping from his underarms, knowing fully well that having done this, he would think of it as his biggest mistake. He would hate his body. He would regret the unruliness of his desires. A truth would metamorphose into a lie. But that would happen only after he had savoured the moment. Would the regret of not tasting it ever let him live in peace?

He remembered what Raghu, a PhD student of Biochemistry had told him, the one he met in the **D.N.A.** lab. Kartik had said to him "I don't want to go to Grinder app. I try to control myself. When the app opens, even by mistake and I see some hot guy, I go crazy."

"All these things mean nothing. Such attractions are momentary. It burns out like a matchstick. If you get carried away by such feelings, you will always keep jumping around like a monkey.

"Why do you...?" Kartik asked suddenly but Raghu signalled him to lower his voice "Why can't you leave it then?" He whispered.

"Look at me, and look at the other people my age. You will know if you will compare us."

"What?" He asked innocently like a small child.

"Arre bhai, ...look...everyone is stable ... everyone has a home, wife...some even have kids...and look at me..." Raghu had put his sample in a centrifuge that began to rotate noisily.

What could he have asked after that. Even his parents are stable. So are Chacha Chachi. That professor and his wife must be too. He has

always visualized his parents like roommates. Talking in measured tones. Whenever something begins to spin out of control they take refuge in lies. Friends with benefits. Not friends literally but friends of popular slang who scream 'trauma trauma' and never forget to put out a story on instagram everyday, hashtag friendship goals

VIII.

Babaji was put on the bier after the bath. The ritual of offering chadars began. At first, the Mausi with the wiggle covered him with her sheet. Folded her hands. Then, both the brothers of Dadi did it. The younger one kept his hands folded for a long while as if he was in a competition. Then, Kartik's parents. Chachi, an electronic engineer by profession whose list of achievements could amaze anyone had been safe till now by virtue of being part of the crowd. Chacha's paunch on which his blue checked shirt seemed to be overstretched hadn't got any special attention till then. When, his name was announced the spotlight turned on him. He had forgotten to get a sheet. Both moved to the front, as if they were on trial in a criminal court and stood there, at a loss. Dadi sensed the mood and immediately intervened with "Our families are the same. Just touch the sheet lying above and take his blessings."

The antenna of the Mausi with the wiggle went up all at once. "Didi, it is the result of your leniency. If they won't learn the rituals what will they do when we aren't around?"

"All this useless drama will be over...what else?" Kartik felt like saying but the allure of the epithet of 'darling child' was so magnetic that he remained silent. Instead, he asked her in his small child voice, "Mausi ji, what is the significance of putting this white sheet?"

Mausi was speechless like he knew she would be. Poor woman, she fell silent after some uuuuh...aaanh... Mausi, known for wasting everyone's time, began to make an excuse of being in a hurry. "We should hurry up, son, cremation time is at 1:30 pm."

The midget bua finished another round of wailing, only with her voice as if a whistle was stuck in her mouth and not a single drop of

tear. Father had long ago learnt how to escape this kind of theatrics. The rituals demanded that Babaji be taken to the hall for 'Antim Darshan' but father simply did not lower the bier from his shoulders. He started climbing down the stairs hurriedly.

There was room for only three in the van. Father sat in the front. Friends eager to sit beside him moved to the front hiding Kartik and Chacha with their backs. Kartik wished for Chacha to go along in the van. He understood the inferiority complex that engulfed him whenever he came to his brother's house. In the beginning he used to wonder why he should address him as 'Chacha' when his father and he were twins. In his mind, Chacha did not simply mean being younger in age but also lower in status. Like being the left hand instead of the right. When as a student he slept late Dadi would accuse him of becoming like his Chacha. Becoming like Chacha felt like an abuse to him. He would get up immediately and start studying. He doesn't want to have an expensive education in a private institution like his Chacha had to have. He would much rather go to a government college like his father did.

The compounder in the Reebok sandal, who never addressed anyone with the honorific 'aap', came running to them and began speaking in a voice louder than necessary, "Doctor shaab is calling both of you."

Kartik was on the cloud nine. Bumping deliberately into friends standing in front he reached the van. Looking at his wrist watch, his father said sternly, "Karti... hurry up. We have to get there by 1:30 pm." Sitting in the van he looked at everyone, in fact stared, and a smile full of sarcasm spread on his lips.

When Chacha began to get in papa asked irritatingly, "Where are you lost?"

Chacha didn't reply. The van started to move. Chacha kept gazing at Babaji. He held Babaji's face in both his hands with the tenderness of a child.

Suddenly he began screaming “Bablu.. bablu.. papa has left us. Papa has gone.” His pupils dilated in fear. Watery eyes. Open mouth. He began to rub Babaji’s hand... “Karti, rub his hands...how cold they are getting.”

Father stretched his hand behind and laid it on Chacha’s hand. He did not look back....Kartik looked in the mirror and noticed that his eyes were blood shot. Father tried to take out his handkerchief but just then the driver stared at him and he froze. Only through his hands kept sending all his energy to Chacha.

Looking at him tears began to flow from Kartik’s eyes. Even if for a few moments he became part of the family. It was grief. Grieving. The heart rending pain of losing one of your own.

IX

People were overflowing outside the cremation ground. Over a hundred, nearly a hundred and fifty people were there. Several long rows of Scooties, Aactiva, Pulsar bikes. From Fortuners to Altos all sorts of small and big, cheap and expensive cars in red, black and grey crowded the place. So many people? Kartik was surprised.

They hadn’t even got down from the van when many shoulders were ready to hold the bier. He remembered his father’s words - “To live in society you have to live like them. They are the ones who support you in illness, in life and in death.”

Once, Kartik had said to him his nostrils flaring in anger – The middle class is so afraid of death that even enemies would come visiting immediately.

Taking in all this Kartik began wondering. Who will hold his body? He will have to die alone. The love he wants to live, the experience of which he wants to resonate in his being, that love would be over in a few moments. Like that experiment with a cat and a lighted candle in a belljar. Marriage brings stability. It brings along a community. It brings ears that hear you. it has consoling eyes. It has

the comfort of a warm body. It has stability. Settled life. Does he have the courage to relinquish it all?

Four people shouldered the bier. Kartik was handed a pot of water brimming to the top. Walking ahead the pandit was giving instructions. When they entered the cremation ground, some more people were waiting and seeing the bier, they started arranging wood in a pit fetching them from a pile of wood close by.

The Bier was kept on the bed of firewood. Another pandit with a grey head arrived. He first made them do a small pooja. Then he smeared a mark on father's forehead. Things for the hawan were put in the pit. Ghee was poured into Babaji's mouth. The young pandit kept chanting mantras all the time.

A mesh of criss crossed firewood was soon in place on Babaji. Father was given a pot brimming with water to hold and was asked to make his round of the pyre. But instead of breaking it, like he had seen them do in the movies, the pot was taken aside to be kept in a corner once the round was over. A wooden stick was dipped in the ghee and was set alight. With their hands on each other's shoulders Chacha and father locked together. At first father set the pyre aflame at the end where Babaji's head lay. Then the pandit took the torch and set fire at all ends.

Flame by flame the fire began to rage. For some time all of them stood there. There were crackles, clouds of smoke, particles of soot spreading around.

Kartik looked everywhere. Dadi wasn't there. But mama in whose car Dadi was supposed to come was there. Was she outside? Should he call her? Would she come? If she didn't, he would drag her by force. But then, wouldn't his image of a good child be besmirched?

She must see the violence of this fire. The dance of death that the roaring flames danced on the body of that man. Her restive mind might get some peace. The Dopamine rush of being free at last.

He rushed outside. Outside in a sultry room the women guardians of society had encircled, their purses and phones in their hands like weapons. He leaped in like a Marvel hero. Holding Dadi's hand he began to pull her up to take her outside.

"Where are you taking me?" Dadi was bewildered.

"Come in therelook at everything with your eyes..."

"Inside.... No...no..." As expected the Mausi with the wiggle said.

"Chalo Dadi... looking at that blazing fire will give you relief."

Kartik felt that Dadi was about to get up from the chair when the flock of sheep began to bleat some argument or another dredged up from their herd mentality. Dadi suddenly sat down more firmly, with greater strength than before and stuck to her chair. She tried to signal something to Kartik with her eyes but he ignored it. Glaring at Kartik the flock of women grew happy now. How many fronts they had battled and won in a day.

Kartik's existence suddenly transformed into non-existence. When he was running from the professor's room, he had missed Dadi. Her memory alone had lent him courage. Closing the door to his room when he broke down burying his head under a pillow he had felt her soft touch in it.

Kartik felt like crying. He came back silently. The crowd was stirring now. Some were looking at the watch, some at messages on whatsapp. Standing next to him his father's friend started to ask him something.

Babaji ceased to exist so easily that he was unable to believe it. He stood very close to his pyre. The fire raged so hard that his face glowed red like blood. A thousand embers shot up from the of blazing wood and shimmered in his eyes.

He felt restless. He felt strangely suffocated. Would he too...? His body too? Like this... suddenly.. bhakk! Just a life away is death from him.

A mysterious energy began to flow in his veins... He felt as if he 'is'. As a whole. Unbroken. He stood in front of the young pandit. He felt the warm breath of the pandit on his neck. He started moving backwards. He would never be trapped in the false ritualism that held his Dadi a prisoner. He will live the truth. His truth. His pure unvarnished truth.



Music Within the Temple Precincts: Harivallabh Sangeet Sammelan and Laxmi Narayan Raag Sabha

Naresh Kumar*

Abstract

This paper looks at *Devi Talab Mandir* (Jalandhar) and *Durgiana Mandir* (Amritsar)—two significant temples wherein two very old and prestigious annual congregations of Hindustani music have been taking place for more than a century. The temple as the space for non-ritual, classical and somewhat non-religious music demands an inquiry since secularism is one of the typical tenets of modernity. While writing the history of these festivals, we shall not only unravel the process of Hinduization that Hindustani music has undergone but also analyse the history of negotiations between religion and secularism, which are unique to Indian modernity. The multivocal past of Harivallabh and the inclusion of *ghazal* and *qawwali* artists at the Lakshmi Narayan Raag Sabha provide a vantage point for me to problematise musical performance in its particular spatial setting within a temple precinct. The paper ends by raising some questions about the ‘temple public’ and ‘music public’.

Keywords: Music festivals, temple, secularism, modernity, public.

Introduction

Commenting upon the present music festivals, Edward Said has remarked, Reading the brief but intelligent article on festivals in Grove’s Dictionary, you become aware of the deep divergence between premodern music festivals as symbolic rituals connected with religion and agriculture and modern music festivals as commemorations of great composers or as commercial and tourist attractions. From the great theatrical festivals of fifth-century Athens to the druidic Eisteddfod and the thirteenth-century Puy in France, the first type has now receded into a dim anthropological past. The

* Assistant Professor, Department of History, Kamala Nehru College, University of Delhi.

second type is very much with us, too much so. With a few exceptions, its extraordinary proliferation and degradation have further weakened a musical life that seems to be getting more disablingly eccentric as time goes on. In this article, Said further describes how certain music festivals which started with an altogether different objective have become very repetitive in nature with regard to the music. Simultaneously, the bourgeois notion of leisure clearly gets reflected in the audience and venues of these festivals. The presence of star performers adds another dimension to the commercialised and bourgeois character of the present-day big musical gatherings. Thus, he aptly remarks that the festivals and the music presented here cannot be divorced from the social circumstances in which they take place (Said 23, 28).

Said's remarks, though made for the Western music festivals, in many ways resemble their Indian counterparts too. In this paper, we are talking specifically about two music festivals which are more than a century old and which take place in not any metropolitan city of India; rather, Jalandhar and Amritsar, two cities of East Punjab hosted these. Keeping in view the observations made by Said, I am trying to look at the history of these two musical events, from their modest religious beginnings to their present incarnations as great music extravaganzas. I will focus more on their spatial setting, the locale, organisers, and listeners while talking less about the performance history. Before talking about Harivallabh Sangeet Sammelan (Jalandhar) and Lakshmi Narayan Raag Sabha (Amritsar) in particular, let us try to understand what we generally mean by music festivals and the cultural setting in which the public performances of music begin. What were the antecedents of these gatherings? How did the public performances begin? Who were the organisers and what motives did they have? Who was the target audience and how did the listening public increase? How did the musicians respond to these new venues and audiences? Unfortunately, there is hardly any comprehensive study with regard to music entering the public sphere and the commencement of music festivals in India. Therefore, while finding answers to these questions, one has to rely upon fragmentary evidence like the writings of Aneesh Praadhan (2004) and Janaki Bakhle (2006) in the context of Western India and those of Lakshmi Subramanian (2006 and 2008) about Southern India. Keeping the

peculiarities of each region in mind, one can generalise these arguments with regard to the emergence of public music performances in India.

From the late nineteenth century, a new and multifaceted cultural sphere started emerging in India, which was literary, musical, oral, visual, and dramatic. Classical music, up till now one of the many entertainments for the highbrow and performed in aristocrats' mansions, courtesan salons, or temples, began to be heard by a relatively larger public in the urban centres. This was the time when cities like Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay provided new opportunities for patronage, whereas the patronage of the princely courts declined due to the establishment of British suzerainty over the Indian princes. This compelled hereditary musicians and courtesans to migrate to these cities in search of new sources of income and support. The traders, who had earned huge profits, emerged as new patrons of music in these cities. They used to organise *nautch* parties either at the salons of courtesans or at their mansions on different occasions in which the women musicians belonging to courtesan or devadasi background performed to entertain their British guests or Indian business associates.¹ We find that till the first half of the twentieth century, the musical soirees at the salons of the courtesans continued, which were open to all those who could afford the price of admission. Therefore, these singers at their residences performed music for the public, albeit a little public. However, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, some of the singers from courtesan backgrounds moved away from dance and focused totally on music and that too, on learning and singing *khyal*, instead of the genres like *thumri* and *dadra*, which were their fortes. They did so because the Indian intelligentsia, influenced by European writers and Victorian codes of morality, not only equated them with prostitutes but their hereditary and traditional music repertoire was also seen with stigma.

There were also some concerts of hereditary male musicians. They used to perform in informal gatherings called *daawats* (invitation), organised by a wealthy or respected courtesan. There were Jumma gatherings, organised on Fridays, in which musicians and other connoisseurs used to be the audience. Sometimes these

performances became competitive and were called *dangals* (wrestling arenas), wherein the musicians showcased their creative abilities. Some concerts were also organised in order to present an upcoming talented musician. Largely, in the late nineteenth century, affluent traders, businessmen, industrialists, and members of the intellectual elite held concerts at their homes on certain occasions for small intimate audiences of special guests, including friends, business associates and music lovers (Pradhan 34-47). Gradually, with the anticolonial movement gaining momentum, the attitude of the educated middle class towards music and its practitioners also began to change and some of the enlightened members of the educated elites began to take music as the symbol of India's glorious past. Hence, with a view to forge a national identity by proving India's glorious past to the British as well as Indians, along with according music and musicians a respectable place in society, they formed serious music clubs like Parsi Gayan Uttejak Mandali (1870) and Poona Gayan Samaj² (1874). These music clubs were supported by the industrial and commercial elites of the cities. Along with organising public performances, these also promoted music education for women and children. Generally, these performances used to be ticketed. Although it is difficult to explain what concert pattern was followed in the performances, the available evidence suggests that there were different patterns which depended upon the taste of the organisers and other members of these bodies. The organisers of Parsi Gayan Uttejak Mandali, for example, were not interested in improvisational aspects of music and they encouraged the performance of different compositions in one raga in a session (Bakhle 72, 80). The experience acquired from music clubs and from other individual organisers of ticketed concerts led to the formation of music circles in the twentieth century. These provided avenues for ticketed public performances on a larger scale and attracted a more cosmopolitan audience. Hence, these circles set a new and significant trend in concert organisation and audience profile. Musicians and other qualified listeners were the members of these circles. Therefore, the number of members and the audience was quite smaller in size as compared to that of present music-promoting bodies and events. There were some music circles formed by musicians too. One can mention the Bombay Music Art Society formed by Anjanibai Malpekar and Sangeet Pracharak Mandal by Vilayat Hussain Khan in the 1930s (Pradhan 350-1). Both

Bhatkhande and Paluskar, principal modernisers of Hindustani music, also organised annual music conferences in the second and third decades of the twentieth century.

Accordingly, the range of public performances expanded from *mehfils*, *dawats*, *jalsas* and *dangals* to concerts organised by music clubs and music circles and other institutions. These concerts and festivals not only enabled the relatively larger public to access the music of the professional hereditary musicians, but amateur and young artists, along with instrumentalists, also got new opportunities to perform in public. Grand concerts and festivals, available to everyone without tickets, were postindependence phenomena when the state, educational institutions and big business houses emerged as patrons of music. In the latter half of the twentieth century, music began to be performed in large auditoriums with sound amplification. The spread of music through educational institutions and radio increased the numbers of listening public many times and the attendance in these concerts began to multiply very quickly. All this affected the concert length, repertoire, use of instruments and many other aspects of performance. We have so far attempted here to identify different trajectories of classical music while coming out of its erstwhile performance venues and reaching the common public. This paper is an attempt to present the history of two mega-events of music for three reasons. First, both gatherings take place in a region which is not considered very 'musical', unlike Maharashtra, South India, or Bengal but their commencement is still concomitant to the classification and modernisation drive with regard to music, going on in Western and southern India.³ Second, barring one exception in the case of Harivallabh in 1928, entry into both these festivals has been free for the audience since their beginning. The third and most important reason for choosing these two music festivals for study is their spatial setting. Harivallabh Sangeet Sammelan and Laxmi Narayan Raag Sabha, both assemble in the courtyards of the temples. Therefore, through the window of the spatial setting of these festivals, I intend to see the linkages between and problematics of modern classical music and Hindu religiosity.

For centuries, music has not only survived but flourished in temples of North and South India. The Haveli Sangeet or Pushti Marg Sangeet of the Krishnate temples of North India, the Periya Melam music performed in Vaishnavite as well as Saivite temples of South India and Kshetram Vadyam ensembles of Kerala, all are very significant music/s and to an extent, they also have grammars of their own (Ho 23-43; Saha 299-318; Tarada 108-151 and Groesbeck 87-112). Moreover, there have been not only interactions between these varieties of music and highbrow Hindustani and Carnatic music; they also have a lot of influence on the respective great traditions. In temples, music is performed while doing liturgical service to the deity enshrined in it and therefore, it is ritual and festival music. It has particular compositions, selective musical genres and repertoire, and musicians belonging to particular castes performing that. Although, as mentioned above, there are various points of interactions between temple-music and modern Hindustani and Carnatic classical music yet both traditions keep themselves at a distance from these types of music while making selective borrowings and eulogising the devotion to God in music. Rolf Groesbeck offers four defining traits of classical music on the basis of which scholars, performers and listeners differentiate it from the rest of the music traditions. First, legitimation with an ancient body of theoretical doctrine or *shastra*, often in Sanskrit; second, preservation by means of a disciplined oral tradition lasting several generations; third, explanation of melodic configurations in terms of the concept of raga and fourth, patronage by a small educated elite (Groesbeck 87). In contrast to the ritual and festival music performed in temples, here we are presenting the case study of two temples of modern East Punjab—Devi Talab Mandir (Jalandhar) and Durgiana Mandir (Amritsar) since these two very significant temples are also the sites where two of the very old and prestigious annual congregations of Hindustani music have been taking place for more than a century.⁴ Shri Baba Harivallabh Sangeet Sammelan, happening since 1875, claims to be the oldest of the classical music festivals and the Shri Lakshmi Narayan Raag Sabha is thirty years younger than that. The Harivallabh Sangeet Sammelan takes place in the last week of December every year, and the Raag Sabha assembles on the occasion of Holi. The temple as the space for non-ritual, classical and somewhat non-religious music demands an inquiry since secularism is one of the typical tenets of modernity. I

argue while writing the history of these festivals, we are trying not only to unravel the process of Hinduization that Hindustani music has undergone but it is also an exercise of making a history of negotiations which are unique to Indian modernity. What made Jalandhar and Amritsar hold these Festivals, and that too, in the precincts of the temples? What were the different responses of Muslims and Sikhs to these at different times? What impact did the episodes like Partition and Khalistan movement—the troubled times in Punjab's history—have on the continuity of the festivals? The nationalist and reformist project accepted the genres like *thumri* and *dadra* which were the forte of hereditary women singers or *tawa'ifs* by interpreting them in Krishnaite idiom but how did the organisers negotiate with baijis singing in the precincts of the temples? What is the 'divine experience', the artists talk of while performing on these stages? We look at these and other questions by relying upon past souvenirs, old newspapers, and oral accounts.

The Cities and the Music Festivals

Before talking about the music festivals, some discussion about the locales where these two great events take place also becomes imperative since the cities play a very significant role in cultural production, distribution, and consumption. It is the urban environment and the special nature of life in a particular city that determines all human activity, including music in that (Nettl 1-17). Jalandhar is an ancient city with a modern face, and the city of Amritsar was founded by the fourth Sikh guru in the second half of the sixteenth century. Therefore, both the cities have their significant position from a historical, religious, educational, and industrial point of view in the region of Punjab. While looking at the religious distribution of the population of Jalandhar between 1901 and 1931, we find that Muslims constituted the largest number —45.88 per cent to 44.45 per cent— whereas the number of Hindus and Jains together declined from 40.21 per cent to 16.59 per cent. At the same time, the number of Sikhs rose from 20.37 per cent to 26.44 per cent. In Amritsar, too, Muslims remained the highest in number —46.44 per cent to 46.96 per cent— while Hindus, including Jains, witnessed a decline. In 1901 they constituted 27.58 per cent of the total population, whereas, in 1931, they remained only 15.72 per cent. The

number of Sikhs registered an increase from 25.88 per cent to 35.80 per cent. Here, one should quickly add that the number of Jains was too small to be counted separately.⁵ While looking at the population figures, we notice that the Hindus kept decreasing in number in both the cities but they had access to education and also dominated in the fields of trade and business. Obviously, it was the factor of wealth and power that made them invest in temple construction and fine arts and hold these festivals. These activities were also undertaken by the Hindus in order to create a particular symbolic identity in a time when society was polarising on communal lines.

Since the beginning of both festivals, the organisers have largely been Punjabi Khatri, the wealthiest and the most dominant mercantile caste. One finds that in the late nineteenth century, Jalandhar was the city where the Muslims dominated in numbers but the Hindus dominated in education, wealth and power. Dayanand Saraswati's message transformed the region of Punjab since his preachings found a much greater acceptance among middle-class, often educated Hindus. Jalandhar was not an exception to this and the powerful Khatri *biradaris* of the city (mainly of Sondhis, Sehgal, Vattas, and Thapars) could not stop the young men like Devraj or his brother-in-law Munshi Ram (later known as Swami Shraddhanand) from following the iconoclastic practices of the Arya Samaj. By the early 1890s, both of them, with their Arya Samaji brethren, established a girls' school, the Arya Kanya Pathshala, to provide an education safe from missionary influence, which later became a fully developed high school (Kanya Mahavidyalaya) and, finally a women's college (Jones 101-2). Unlike Amritsar, it did not emerge as the centre of the Singh Sabha movement; rather, orthodox Hindu organisations like Sanatan Dharm Sabha were also active here since 1860s (Shastri 230). Therefore, a city dominated by Hindu elites only could encourage saints like Baba Harivallabh to take the initiative of starting an annual musical gathering in memory of his late guru. The story goes that Baba Harivallabh, the third in the line of the gaddi or sacred seat associated with the shrine, thought of commemorating the barsi (death anniversary) of his guru Tuljagiri around 1875 by inviting sadhus and saints who sang devotional songs in traditional Dhrupad style at his Samadhi.⁶ The ceremony started with Hawan Yagya at the Samadhi of Tuljagiri followed by *bhandara* (free food)

for ascetics, saints, devotees, and the poor. The congregation lasted for two days. Another story told by Bhai Baldeep Singh, the exponent of Talwandi gharana of dhrupad is that the festival began in 1875 when Baba Harivallabh sent the *nazrana* (bestowal) of a *sawa* (one-and-a quarter) rupee to invite Miyan Kalandar Baksh Talwandi Wale to perform at the occasion.⁷ The next year, many musicians from different towns of Punjab like Miyan Ahmed Baksh of Phillour, Mohammed Baksh of Haryana (Hoshiyarpur district), Vilayat Ali and Meera Baksh from Shyam Chourasi *Gharana*, along with those from Amritsar and Lahore also came to sing in the congregation (Bawra 22-3).⁸ Congregations like these became a regular annual event year after year. Although the fame of this Sangeet Mela had spread far and wide during Baba Harivallabh's time, yet primarily sadhus and saints were invited to sing. After the demise of Baba Harivallabh in 1885 his disciple Pt. Tolo Ram became his successor (Shastri 63-4).⁹ Tolo Ram kept the tradition alive by organising the musical gathering every year in memory of Tuljagiri—his Guru's Guru—but now the Sammelan came to be named after Harivallabh himself rather than his Guru. Thereafter, in addition to Punjab, singers from other parts of northern India were also called to sing in the gathering. Therefore, what began as an impromptu meeting of musicians, emerged as a performative space for eclectic, diverse, rich and inclusive music. Although the site of the raag mela was a Hindu temple, yet the power of music brought musicians and saints together across the boundaries of their respective faiths in its early phase.

Within twenty years of its beginning, the mela had acquired so much fame that it even attracted a person like Pt. Vishnu Digambar Paluskar to come here. It was Paluskar's visit somewhere in the initial years of the twentieth century that infused the classical music element in this mela (Bakhle 143).¹⁰ Paluskar and later, the retinue of his disciples established and popularised classical music and modern *khyal* style at Harivallabh. His disciples like Vinayak Rao Patwardhan, Narayan Rao Vyas and Omkarnath Thakur kept coming to perform here for years (Kapuria 2023, forthcoming). After Paluskar's visit itself, Tolo Ram gave serious thought to inviting musicians from all over the country. For this purpose, he undertook a journey throughout India and invited renowned singers to the festival.

Henceforth, the participation of stalwarts like Bhaskar Rao Bakhle, Ram Krishna Bua Vaze and many others added new grandeur to the Sammelan. In 1919, Gandhi also visited the mela (Shastri 51). Hence Harivallabh Sangeet Mela had already acquired an unprecedented prestige amongst the musicians in 1910s and 1920s and was being given a place in journals and newspapers as early as 1912-3 (Neuman 105-6).¹¹ Yet Hindustani classical music was one of the many activities performed here. As mentioned earlier, it began as an assembly of sadhus and saints and till 1948 they used to come here in a great numbers. Various other activities like baintbazi or couplet-contest, devotional singing, qawwalis etc. were organised in different corners of the site; but the central and most widely known thing was the performances of classical singers who used to be called here from all parts of India.

It was nobody but Tolo Ram who turned this tradition into an institution when in 1922 Shri Baba Harivallabh Sangeet Mahasabha was formed. A young English teacher at Sain Das Anglo-Sanskrit High School, Jagannath Parti took the initiative to mobilise the educated middle-class elites and other notables of the city for this cause. Even after the formation of the Mahasabha, the mela had a multivocal character. Radha Kapuria (“Rethinking Musical Pasts” 80-83) refers to an invitation letter of 1924 which “affirms to the popularity of non-raga popular music such as the Punjabi kaafiyan, the shabd saakhi and ‘devi ki bhetaan’ amongst even the elite notables to whom the letter was addressed, and who were the foremost patrons of the annual fair. Despite the main attraction being classical and raga music, the reference to genres which are of these essentially non-classical items can thus be seen as a means to attract a larger audience via these more popular genres and draw them towards classical music through the backdoor, as it were.” The changes brought by the institution reflect in a notice of November 1928, issued by the Mahasabha, one month before the festival. The notice forbids anyone to felicitate the artist on the stage personally; and the artists are also forbidden to receive any gift on the stage. The audiences were warned not to have cigarettes, make noise or pick up any fight (Shastri 128). According to Kapuria, “This notice captures in miniature how the space of performance at the Harivallabh was modernised and nationalised under the aegis of the

Sangeet Mahasabha, which was formally instituted six years previously in 1922." In 1928, Dwarkadas, a great devotee and disciple of Tolo Ram succeeded to the sacred gaddi. Although Dwarkadas carried on the tradition till he breathed his last in 1952, yet quite earlier, he nominated Seth Hukam Chand and Shri Ashwini Kumar as Trustees of Baba Harivallabh Sangeet Mahasabha to look after properties of the trust situated at Devi Talab.

Partition changed the total demographic and spatial complexion of the city due to the fact that the Muslim population evacuated their settlements which were occupied by the Hindus and Sikhs coming from the other side of the border. The 1951 census figures for the Jalandhar district show that the Hindu constituted 42.6 per cent and Sikhs, 56.4 per cent of the total population, whereas only 0.33 per cent Muslims remained.¹² With the transformation of the locale, the transformation in the nature of the mela was inevitable. Hence, with the migration of Muslims to Pakistan, the things like qawwalis also disappeared.¹³ Moreover, many stalwart Muslim classical musicians also migrated from East Punjab to Pakistan after 1947. The artists like Amanat-Fateh Ali (Patiala), Salamat-Nazakat Ali (Sham Chaurasi) and Fateh-Mubarak Ali (Jalandhar), who were the regular performers in this gathering, left a gap not easy to be filled. This was also the time when Ashwini Kumar took charge as head of the trust in 1948. Kumar, a police officer and an ardent lover of Indian classical music also represented the newly emerging Indian state which, under the influence of Patel and, later Keskar, decided to do the best possible for the promotion and purification of Hindustani classical music.¹⁴ It can be said that with the patronage of Ashwini Kumar, a new era began in the history of Harivallabh and it was transformed from an informal Raag Mela into a properly institutionalised Sangeet Sammelan. This new incarnation of the mela also witnessed a transformation of its audience which earlier comprised of ascetics, saints, and the common villagers. How the sadhus vanished from the scene cannot be guessed so easily. It is possible that a police officer becoming the head of this religious trust might not have suited their wishes. Moreover, Kumar not only opened the sammelan for women artistes to perform but now they could also sit in the audience and enjoy the music. This entry of women in the festival might also be against the wishes of some

sadhus because, at that time, women singers were quite far from the acceptance and respect that they are given today.

Kumar's era witnessed the modernisation of the festival in terms of financial support from the local industrialists and the state; meticulous management of the event; good remuneration to the performers; deployment of the state armed forces to handle the crowd etc. Kumar's ambitious drive also attempted to professionalise, or discipline, the Harivallabh's attendees too, transforming them into appreciative listeners, schooled in rapt and deliberative listening practices (Denora 146-7); Kumar's own words affirm this.

In 1948, when I joined, I asked the citizens of Jalandhar to pay one Rupee . . . It was collected from their homes. Gradually they started feeling that it was their own mela. In five years only, the atmosphere was completely changed. An ordinary Paanwala would get up and tell the musician that he did not strike this proper shruti.

Here it is also worth mentioning that the present-day magnificence of Devi Talab Mandir took shape in his trusteeship only as the industrialists and the common people of the city themselves decided to get the renovation and beautification done by volunteering manually as well as financially. Although Kumar being a government servant, could not involve himself in any religious affair like temple construction, the foundation stone of the temple was laid by his mother only. With this, the iconography of the festival also changed and Goddess Saraswati became very prominent on the cover pages of the souvenirs. The demand for a new temple at the holy cite of Devi Talab might also have its origin in the desires of the Hindu elite of the city to register their symbolic presence amidst the Sikh-dominated politics of Punjab. In 1976, the sammelan celebrated its 101st anniversary, which lasted for nine days. Things were going very smoothly till 1982 but the sammelan had to be suspended for four-five years as there could be no public meeting after 6 pm, and no artist was willing to come to Punjab, which was then burning in flames of terrorism.¹⁵ For these years, there used to be the performances of the local artists only and that too during the day-time. Hawan was positively done at the Samadhi of Baba Harivallabh (Bawra 149-55).¹⁶ The sammelan could be revived only in 1989 with

the assistance of North Zone Cultural Center, Patiala when the Congress government with Bhai Singh as the chief minister came to power.¹⁷ However, the relationship between the Mahasabha and the North Zone Cultural Centre was not cordial since its beginning. Henceforth, the Center withdrew its support in 1993. Since then, the Mahasabha has been organising the festival with financial grants coming from the state government, public sector corporations, local industrialists, newspaper-magnets, and donations. NZCC has also been sponsoring some of the artists for the last four-five years.¹⁸ Thus, the Harivallabh began as a spontaneous gathering of saints and musicians and later became a cosmopolitan fair in which musicians from all parts of India participated.

As compared to Harivallabh, our knowledge about Shri Lakshmi Narayan Raag Sabha is very limited. It only comes from two sources: a small booklet produced by the organisers and interview of Lajpat Rai Khanna, a local businessman and the general secretary of the committee. Taking inspiration from Harivallabh Sammelan, the Raag Sabha was initiated by Gursahai Mal Kapoor (1866-1935) in 1905 along with his friends Natthuram Rangwale and Vadhava Mal Chopra. It was Kapoor only who thought of building the Durgiana temple and the foundation stone of this was laid down by Pt. Madan Mohan Malviya in 1924. In the absence of any solid evidence, these initiatives of Kapoor and his friends can be seen as steps of establishing the symbolic presence and authority of the Hindus in a primarily Sikh city. After Kapoor's demise, his nephew Madan Lal Kapoor, popularly known as Madomal served this missionary cause with the firm support of his wealthy Khatri team members till he died in 1973. Thereafter his son Deenanath Kapoor carried forward the tradition with the support of businessmen like Ram Lubhaya Kapoor, Lajpat Rai Khanna, and J.J. Mehra, etc. For almost a century, the Raag Sabha remained, therefore, an informal group of business magnates and music aficionados of Amritsar. Around 2005 some of the organisers and patrons were not very enthusiastic about continuing the Raag Sabha further; then, a lobby of lawyers under the leadership of Sudarshan Kapoor took the lead to hold the torch along with Lajpat Rai Khanna. This time the sabha was formally constituted and registered. Presently, the society receives grants from public sector banks, private educational institutions, and the

North Zone Cultural Centre, along with donation from local philanthropists. Although the turbulent 1980s had a disastrously negative impact upon Raag Sabha yet the booklet only states that before 1980 the Sabha used to be at Dussehra Ground as 40 to 50 thousand audiences used to enjoy classical music during Holi days here. No place was more suitable than any other for making the sitting arrangement for such a large gathering of listeners. But the black shadow of terrorism beginning around 1980 took in its grip the all-round progress of the city of Amritsar. At the same time, efforts were also made to discontinue the Raag Sabha. Due to the atmosphere of terror and fear, the number of performers and listeners both declined. Therefore, the Raag Sabha also had to be shifted to the Ved Katha Bhavan, which is inside the temple itself.

We find certain commonalities between the two festivals. First, both music festivals are organised by independent bodies, not directly linked to the respective temples. Although there can hardly be any doubt that some of the members may be active in both organisations yet, in the case of Harivallabh, there have been many disputes since the time when Ashwini Kumar stepped in. Secondly, there is hardly any Sikh representation in both committees. These committees are well-connected to power and also utilise media not only to popularise the festivals but also to propagate other things. Third, in both festivals, one finds the standard and normative concert pattern similar to that in any other metropolitan city. The Sikh tradition of music hardly gets any space on both stages. There is hardly any singer who prefers to sing a composition in Punjabi. Very rarely, the artists sing Shabads or poems written by Sikh gurus and other saint poets compiled in Shri Guru Granth Sahib. Fourth, along with both festivals, the classical music competitions for the young take place, though the Harivallabh one is taken as more prestigious. At the same time, one can identify certain marked differences between the two. As compared to the grandeur and lavishness of Harivallabh, the Raag Sabha is very modest. In Lajpat Rai Khanna's own words, "We don't have as much money as the Harivallabh committee has. We hold the entire four-day festival in the amount which they spend for just one evening."¹⁹ Therefore the local and second-line artists get a good chance to perform here. Secondly, it has not received much coverage and limelight from the media as compared to the Harivallabh.

Although since the beginning, classical and semi-classical music has been performed on both platforms, yet the Raag Sabha is the stage where ghazal and qawwali are also welcomed. The booklet mentions the names of Shankar Shambhu, Habib Painter, Zafar Hussain, Babban Diwana, Rahmat Qawwal, Nazir Niazi and other renowned qawwali parties.

We can also compare the two festivals following the taxonomy proposed by Ivan Orosa Paleo and Nachoem M. Wijnberg (50-61). Although the main focus of the authors is to investigate the economic functions of the music festivals yet the taxonomy they propose with regard to the classification of music festivals is quite useful otherwise. Both the festivals show their competitive and non-competitive character as along with the performances of the established artists, the competitions for the young musicians are also organised. Both events are organised with a 'not for profit' purpose because no tickets are sold. As far as the range of the audience is concerned, like other classical music congregations, here too, it is wide but focused, as classical music has a niche audience. It is wide because it cuts across the class, religion and gender backgrounds of the audience. The format of both congregations is one-track, non-ranking and aural goods only. All the musicians perform on one stage and a fixed venue. However, with regard to ranking, the senior-junior hierarchy is followed throughout India as far as the festivals of classical music are concerned. Hence the festivals under study are no exceptions. With regard to organisation, Harivallabh stands higher than the Raag Sabha as it involves a well-structured organising body with different committees, a good network of publicity and a large number of sponsors, including the corporate houses, PSUs, the state government and individuals including NRIs. Both festivals showcase mainstream classical music but the Raag Sabha shows a higher degree of innovativeness since it provides relatively greater space to non-classical music and young artists. With regard to scope, both can be characterised as national festivals and at times, artists from abroad have also performed in these sammelans.

Temples, Music, Modernity and Nationalism

After giving a brief account of both the festivals and their history, we again come back to the question of how temples emerged as

performance venues of these musical extravaganzas. As Partha Chatterjee has pointed out that the societies of Asia and Africa are not 'perpetual consumers of modernity', experienced and defined by Europe and North America. Presenting a critique of Benedict Anderson, he argues that "the most powerful, as well as the most creative results of the nationalist imagination in Asia and Africa, are posited not on an identity but rather on a difference with the "modular" forms of the national society propagated by the modern West." In the case of the rise of anticolonial nationalism, he points out that nationalism creates its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society well before it initiates its political encounter with the imperial power. Nationalism acknowledges the superiority of the West but only in 'material' terms. A burgeoning nation marks its identity on the basis of its 'spiritual' or inner domain. Then nationalism declares the domain of the 'spiritual' its sovereign territory and refuses to permit the colonial regime to intervene in that. Thus, he argues that a nation imagines itself culturally and spiritually before it does so politically and constitutionally. Chatterjee elaborates that in the case of India, nationalism witnessed its imagination in the spheres of language, drama, novel, art, education, and family. Music can also be an area which is now being thought about in this direction. We have already talked about how the presence of Arya Samajis and Sanatanis facilitated the beginning of Harivallabh festival in Jalandhar. This was further strengthened by Paluskar's arrival on the scene. Similarly, Amritsar's Raag Sabha might also be an attempt of the Hindu middle class to patronise classical music like their Jalandhari counterparts. Following Partha Chatterjee and Aqil Bilgrami, Janaki Bakhle (258-9) has argued that while defining 'secularism' in the case of India, 'religion is not entirely separated from either public life or modern forms of cultural expression'. She points out that the modern history and development of North Indian classical music in the nineteenth century is a perfect example of Bilgrami's "secular re-enchantment". She further argues that musical forms like Qawwali, Kirtan, and Bhajan etc. are mystical, spiritual, and devotional in character and they also have their particular influence over Hindustani music. Moreover, even in the field of classical music, there is no rigid separation between religious and secular music based on content. Similarly, Meilu Ho talks of a continuum between the liturgical music of the Vaishnavite temples

and modern classical music. According to him, the reasons for the liturgical to the classical flow of influence can be inferred from many examples. These include the use of archaic versions of raga in liturgical compositions; the lives of sixteenth-century Vaishnava poet-singers and their song output as narrated in texts of the tradition; the availability of *kirtan* sources (and therefore knowledge of authorship and liturgical use) from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; the fact of overlapping compositions between the traditions; the testimonies of well-known singers acknowledging textual and musical sources; discussions with connoisseurs and scholars; the existence of famous gharana recordings from throughout the last century along with recent liturgically themed albums by contemporary singers; and the study of style (207-35).

Michiko Urita also talks of the transreligious and intercommunal nature of North Indian classical music and argues that its origins go back to multiple traditions like Bhakti movement, Sufism and Santism. Based on the interviews of musicians, he further argues that even the romantic element found in Hindustani music takes the performer and the listeners to something divine. He thus believes that despite having its historical roots in the Hindu tradition, and despite the current presence of Hindu elements, Hindustani classical music is also a product of Persian and Sufi musical culture, the patronage of Mughal emperors, and contributions made by legendary Muslim musicians. Thus, whether the past or present; elite or popular; Hindustani music and its associated social practices have always tended to transcend sectarian or communal boundaries, embodying pluralism and syncretism rather than exclusivity and chauvinism. According to him, the spiritual element shared origins and a common heritage result in the processes which make a practising musician and modern patrons think beyond sectarian boundaries (190-206). Thus bringing the case of music closer to contemporary debates about secularisation, and given the overwhelming presence of religiosity in the field of music, one can agree with Partha Chatterjee in claiming that a formulaic secularisation in at least this domain of Indian culture has failed (57-74). Janaki Bakhle describes how, in the twentieth century, music underwent a transformation from “one type of entertainment among many others in princely courts” to a high art form that occupied a critical position in the national imagination as a cultural symbol of 'an ancient and accomplished civilisation' (266).

This required a new pedagogy in order to prepare new middle-class women performers, new and respectable content and a modern history. This was the task that was undertaken by two great modernisers of Hindustani music, Bhatkhande and Paluskar. Both were Brahmins, and both came from Maharashtra. She further points out that the removal of religiosity from music was a non-issue for both Paluskar and Bhatkhande. Bhatkhande was a rational musicologist, and he tried to classify, categorise, and classicise music. On the other hand, Paluskar, the champion of devotional nationalism, endeavoured to cleanse it from debauchery and also to sacralise it. Finally, Paluskar's agenda —Hindu, gendered, religious, and secular— emerged triumphant in pedagogy as well as the performance of music. Thus, she attributes suffusing the public space of music with sanctity and piety to Paluskar's agenda of the Hinduisation of music.²⁰ While looking at Harivallabh and Raag Sabha, one can agree with Bakhle because Paluskar performed at Harivallabh for many years and Raag Sabha booklet also mentions his name first in the list of performers.

This brings us to the aspect of 'divine experience' which artists talk about while performing on the stages like these. This 'divinity' has a clear manifestation in the narratives of the musicians that I came across during my fieldwork. This has two-fold origins both being complementary to each other. Harivallabh started at a religious place with a feeling of devotion and bhakti for a guru and grew up under the influence of a cult figure who was to be declared triumphant in due course of history as far as the modernisation of Indian classical music is concerned. As Bakhle shows that in Paluskar's successful co-optation of the public sphere, one sees clearly how the commingling of religious instruction with musical education cemented the identification of the culture of the bourgeoisie as Hindu. Indian culture, in his understanding, was Hindu culture, and Paluskar's unapologetic and triumphant return of music to tradition accomplished the incorporation of music's culture under the same umbrella (332-3). Paluskar and his disciples had a long association with this mela and there are many stories of Paluskar's dedication towards this stage. Therefore, it seems that it manifests as a reverence for the musical guru as well as for Baba Harballabh, who is also considered an accomplished musician.²¹ Modern institutions of

musical learning don't produce artists. Artistes come from the Guru-Shishya tradition, like that of Paluskar which believes that music comes by God's grace as well as that of guru. Harivallabh and Raag Sabha are the platforms where all the big gurus have performed. That's why the youngsters think it as a matter of great honour and take it as an opportunity given by God or Baba when they sit to sing/play there.

Conclusion

Both the festivals discussed here represented in their early phases a syncretic, inclusive, and pluralistic conglomeration of devotion, mysticism, and music. Even their spatial setting at the Hindu shrines did not blunt this pluralistic orientation. Later, the changes in the socio-political and cultural fabric of the cities in particular, and the Punjab and the Indian nation in general, also did not let music remain uninfluenced. Although both the music gatherings claim to represent and promote classical music only yet they have a multivocal history. Interestingly even today, the organisers of the Raag Sabha invite ghazal singers to perform in the temple premises whilst the performances of devotional songs set to film tunes at Devi Talab by local music groups in the temple do not let the listeners of Harivallabh enjoy the shehnai and dhrupad recitals. Moreover, these days, even there are acrobats and folk artists also in the ground on all three days.²² There have also been issues between the temple committee and the Harivallabh Mahasabha with regard to the ownership of the land. We will conclude this chapter with some unanswered questions which still need to be worked on. Deepa Reddy and John Zavos talk about 'temple publics' in the context of contemporary India and the globalised world. By the term, they mean that temples and the practices associated with them shape and invoke communities in different ways (241-60). While engaging with temples, we not simply act in public but also form a public. Hence temples emerge as "nodes around which people gather, communities assemble, and publics emerge in relation to questions of religion." (Reddy and Zavos 251). One can ask some fundamental questions in the case of both the 'temple publics' and music festivals as well. How did the idea of replicating the architecture of the Golden Temple emerge in the case of both the shrines and who financed their gold

and silver beautification? Are the 'temple publics' and the music publics the same? If not, then on what points do the two differ from each other? Seeking answers to these and other questions will lead to a more enriched understanding of religiosity and music in Punjab in particular and India more generally.

*This paper was presented at 25th European Conference on South Asian Studies held in Paris in July 2018. I am grateful to the organisers for granting me the travel support and to the panel conveners Dr. Priyanka Basu and Dr. Anaïs da Fonseca.

Endnotes

- 1 According to a contemporary source, 'nautch' was a generic term encompassing specific music and dance forms like *nach*, *baithak*, *jalsa*, and *pachamba*, each of which determined the relative scope of music and dance in the performance. *Nach* was a combined performance of singing and dance, *baithak* was a vocal recital presented by the performer in a seated position; and *jalsa* saw the performer sing and sit in turns; while *pachamba* was a vocal recital by a songstress in a seated position, performed at the house of a leading member of her community. K. Raghunathji, 'Bombay Dancing Girls', in Jas Burgess (ed.), *The Indian Antiquary: A Journal of Oriental Research*, Vol. XIII (Delhi: Swati Publications, rpr., 1984 [1884]), 166, 170. Quoted in Aneesh Pradhan 339-58.
- 2 'Parsi Gayan Uttejak Mandali' was founded by Kaikhushroo Naoroji Kabraji, a member of the Bombay Municipal Corporation, a theatre activist and the editor of the Gujarati newspaper *Rast Gofar*. With regard to his views on women's music education, see Bakhle, *Two Men and Music*, 70-1. Balwant Trimbuck Sahasrabuddhe was the founder of Poona Gayan Samaj. About him and the activities of the Samaj, see Bakhle, 75-80.
- 3 I have discussed elsewhere at length why Punjab is thought of as a land of agriculture and not of culture. See Kumar 3-31. See also Kumar 23-27.
- 4 Devi Talab Mandir is counted among 51 Sakti Pithas and Durgiana Mandir also claims its antiquity because of being located at the site of a 700-year-old Sitala Mata temple and a Hanuman temple which is believed to be older than that. About the mythological significance, history, renovation and gold-beautification of Devi Talab Mandir see Jalandhari 1-70. About Durgiana Mandir see www.durgiana-mandir.com, accessed June 24th, 2018.

- 5 Table No. 16---Religions, Census Reports, Part II, Punjab District Gazetteers, Volume IX, Part B., Jullundur District, Statistical Tables, 1935 (Superintendent, Government Publishing, Punjab, 1935), p. lix. Table no. 16---Religions, Census Reports, Part II, *Punjab District Gazetteers*, Volume IX, Part B., Amritsar District, Statistical Tables, 1933 (The Superintendent, Government Publishing, Punjab, 1934), p. xlix.
- 6 1875 is the most widely accepted date, since Bawra, Shastri and the official website of Shri Baba Harivallabh Mahasabha, all mention this as the year of its commencement. However, the 1911 issue of the Indian Music Journal ascribes its beginning in 1878, since it published a notice from Pandit ToloRam, then the Mahant that 34th Sammelan would take place in December 1911. Quoted in Dard Neuman (105).
- 7 Bhai Baldeep Singh, Interview by the researcher, 25 December, 2011.
- 8 Bawra can be called the principal chronicler of the festival. His two books present the accounts of each annual sammelan with the minutest details from the late 1960s to 2002. In contrast to the official narrative about the founder, he negates the fact that Baba Harivallabh was a great musician. Bawra, Harivallabh Darshan, 10-12.
- 9 Although Tolo Ram is mentioned as the successor of Baba Harivallabh yet Shastri gives another line of mahants of Devi Talab starting from Baba Himgiri to whom Maharaja Ranjit Singh had given the patta of this land. According to Shastri, Harivallabh was succeeded by Basant Giri, Madhav Giri, Shiv Giri and Moti Giri. Raghunath Giri was the last mahant who could not prove his mahantship in the court. It can be understood that after Harivallabh, there was a clear demarcation between his religious successors and musical successors but there was no dispute over the proprietary rights of land till the time of Dwarkadas.
- 10 According to Bawra (1998) it was 1901 whereas Shastri says that it was 1908. Kapuria (2018) also agrees with 1901. Janaki Bakhle however, believes that it was 1897.
- 11 Other than Neuman see also *The Tribune*, 17 December, 1913, p. 5. Although the Harivallabh website mentions the quotation about the notice of the event published in *The Tribune*, 1913 yet gives no date. I am grateful to Radha Kapuria for providing me with the exact reference.
- 12 Lakshmi Chandra Vashishta, B.A. (Hons), LL B, P.C.S., *Census of India 1951, Vol. VIII, Punjab, PEPSU, Himachal Pradesh, Bilaspur & Delhi, Part II-A—General Population, Age & Social Tables*, TABLE D-II, 298-9.
- 13 Kapuria (83), however suggests that the nationalisation of the festival along the Paluskarite lines had begun two decades before the Partition.

- 14 "When I came there in 1948, the mahant was dying; he had no money and there was nobody to help him. He asked me if I could carry the tradition further. I told him that I am a government servant but you are in charge of a religious or a semi-religious organisation, of which music is a part also." The *mahant* so requested Kumar to look after the property and carry forward the tradition of organising the *mela*. Ashwini Kumar, former Director General, BSF, DG, Punjab and Himachal Police, A very famous sportsman who led many Indian contingents abroad. He was also the vice-president of the International Olympic Committee and that of the International Hockey Federation too. Kumar, Interview by the researcher, New Delhi, 24 May, 2006. Submitted to the SARAI archives.
- 15 Rakesh Dada, interview by the researcher, Jalandhar, 16 March, 2006. Also, Dada, Harivallabh- A rich tradition of Musical geniuses.
- 16 The *sammelan* of 1983 lasted for a day only and in 1984, there was no *sammelan*; only *hawan* was done. I think that it is the regularity of this *hawan* only which makes the claim of continuity of the *sammelan* strong.
- 17 Rakesh Dada's interview gives detailed account of the suspension and revival of the *sammelan*. He said that Beyant Singh, the then Chief Minister, assigned the duty for three of his cabinet ministers to sit in the *sammelan* for one night each to let the music go on without any hindrance.
- 18 For a general survey of the festival, see Dada. Also see Kumar, 3-31; Kapuria (1-30). I find one major problem with Kapuria's article. She gives undue emphasis to the secular aspect of Kumar's personality whereas the interviews I conducted with him do not support this very much. With regard to developments after 1990s, also see Kapuria (1480-1490).
- 19 Lajpat Rai Khanna, interview by the researcher, Amritsar, 25 May, 2016.
- 20 Although 'secular' and 'religious' are opposite to each other but Bakhle demonstrates in her paper that Paluskar's agenda had both elements. His pedagogy was secular but semi-religious. She further argues that even Bhatkhande's non-religious pedagogy has been taken over by that of Paluskar which upholds unconditional acquiescence for guru.
- 21 Bawra (1998) doesn't agree with the fact that he was a great musician. He had learnt some music and could also sing some dhrupad compositions. Kumar, in his interview, also called him a singing minstrel. The official discourse, however depicts him as a great musician and musicologist. This has resulted in the biography of Harivallabh being taught in B.A. music syllabus of Punjab University.

- 22 For the last five years, I have seen that some local devotees organise a congregation on the temple premises every Friday. As the first day of the festival also falls on Friday, this becomes a nuisance for the listeners of classical recitals.

Works Cited

- Bakhle, Janaki. *Two Men and Music: Nationalism in the Making of an Indian Classical Tradition*. Oxford UP, 2005.
- . “Music as the Sound of the Secular.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2008, pp. 256-84.
- Bawra, Joginder Singh. *Harivallabh Darshan*. Sangeet Kala Manch, 1998.
- . *Harivallabh Darpan*. Sangeet Kala Manch, 2003.
- Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton UP, 1993.
- . “Fasting for Bin Laden.” *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors*, edited by David Scott and Charles Hirschkind. Stanford UP, 2006, pp. 57-74.
- Dada, Rakesh. *Harivallabh- A Rich Tradition of Musical Geniuses*. Om Publications, 2018.
- Denora, Tia. “Culture and Music.” *The Sage Handbook of Cultural Analysis*, edited by T. Bennett and J. Frow. SAGE, 2008, pp. 145-62.
- Groesbeck, R. “‘Classical Music,’ ‘Folk Music,’ and the Brahmanical Temple in Kerala, India.” *Asian Music*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1999, pp. 87-112.
- Ho, Meilu. “A True Self Revealed: Song and Play in Pushti Marg Liturgical Service.” *The World of Music*, vol. 51, no. 2, 2009, pp. 23-43.
- . “Connecting Histories: Liturgical Songs as Classical Compositions in Hindustani Music.” *Ethnomusicology*, vol. 57, no. 2, 2013, pp. 207-35.
- Jalandhari, D. *Devi Talab Mandir Itihas ke Jharokhe se*. Nishita Prakashan, 2004.
- Jones, Kenneth W. *Socioreligious Reform movements in British India*. Cambridge UP, 1989.
- Kapurja, Radha. “Redefining Music’s Sacrality: A Snapshot of Harballabh Music Festival, 1997-2002.” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, vol. 72, no. 2, 2011, pp. 1480-1490.
- . “Rethinking Musical Pasts: Harballabh Festival of Punjab, c. 1875-1950.” *Social Scientist*, vol. 43, no. 5/6, 2015, pp. 77-91.
- . “National, Modern, Hindu? Postindependence Trajectory of Jalandhar’s Harballabh Music Festival.” *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 55, no. 3, 2018, pp. 1-30.

- . “V.D. Paluskar and the Punjab: Assessing a Complex Relationship.” *Punjabi Centuries: Histories of Punjab*, edited by Anshu Malhotra. Orient Blackswan, forthcoming, 2023.
- Kumar, Naresh. “Harballabh Sangeet Mela of Jalandhar: A Festival of Music in the City of Sports.” *Sangeet Natak*, vol. XLV, no. 2, 2011, pp. 3-31.
- . *Social History of Hindustani Music in Twentieth Century: Music Festivals, Broadcasting and Music Discourse*. 2019. Ambedkar U, Delhi, M.Phil. Dissertation.
- Nettl, Bruno. *Eight Urban Musical Cultures*. Urbana UP, 1976.
- Neuman, Dard. “The Production of Aura in the Gramophone Age of ‘Live’ Performance.” *Asian Music* vol. 40 no. 3, 2009, pp. 100-23.
- Paleo, Ivan Orosa and Nachoem M. Wijnberg. “Classification of Popular Music Festivals: A Typology of Festivals and an Inquiry into Their Role in the Construction of Music Genres.” *International Journal of Arts Management*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2006, pp. 50-61.
- Pradhan, Aneesh. “Perspectives on performance practice: Hindustani music in nineteenth and twentieth century Bombay (Mumbai).” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2004, pp. 339-358.
- Reddy, Deepa and John Zavos. “Temple Publics: Religious Institutions and the Construction of Contemporary Hindu Communities.” *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 3, Special Issue: “Temple Publics—Religious Institutions and the Construction of Contemporary Hindu Communities”, 2009, pp. 241-260.
- Saha, S. “The Movement of Bhakti along a North-West Axis: Tracing the History of the Pushti Mārg between the Sixteenth and Nineteenth Centuries.” *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 2007, pp. 299-318.
- Said, Edward W. “On Pomp and Circumstance (Music Festivals).” *Music At The Limits*. Columbia UP, 2008, pp. 23-28.
- Shastri, Krishnanda. *Trigarta Pradesh Jalandhar: Aitihāsik evam Dharmik Drishtikon*. Bharatiya Sanskrit Bhavan, 1998.
- Subramanian, Lakshmi. *From the Tanjore Court to Madras Music Academy: A Social History of Music in South India*. Oxford UP, 2006.
- . *New Mansions for Music: Performance, Pedagogy and Criticism*. Social Science Press, 2008.
- Terada, Yoshitaka. “Temple Music Traditions in Hindu South India: Periya Melam and its Performance Practice.” *Asian Music*, Vol. 39, No. 2, 2008, pp. 108-151.
- Urita, M. “Transreligious and Intercommunal: Hindustani Music in Classical and Contemporary India.” *Common Knowledge*, Vol 28, No. 2, 2016, pp. 190-206.



Introducing the Spectacle of Monomania in Satyajit Ray's *Two: A Play of the Infectious Capital*

Richik Banerjee*, Madhurima Mukhopadhyay**

Abstract

Contrasting between wealth and penury, the abstract and the objective, the obsolete and the subjective, motion and stasis, alienation and belonging, Satyajit Ray's short silent film, *Two: A Film Fable* (1964) promotes an understanding of the *capital* of freedom which critiques the global circulation of *capital-as-freedom*. Ray delves deep into the existential 'lack' of the material 'thingness' (*plastic capital*) of the haves by introducing the metaphor of 'silence' as noise to the eyes. This paper attempts to highlight the fallacious reasoning of factorised *capital aggression* as an identifier of global spectacle and how it recuperates modern families into machinic puppets at the mercy of the global *plastic market*.

Keywords: aggression, capital, freedom, market, plastic, thingness

Introduction

(Wars can only bring woe,
What will you gain out of warfare?)
-Goopi Gyne Bagha Byne (1969)

Satyajit Ray has tried to cultivate artistic creativity in his films in order to reflect the narrative affectivity of human cognition by throwing a cartographic lens of the human psyche in a rapidly changing world. Ray's picturesque humanitarianism, as reflected in his films, seems to be a clear critique of borrowed 'modernity' which has often neglected (and outcasted) organic solidarity of the 'non-

* Research Scholar, Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Amity University, Kolkata.

** Assistant Professor, Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Amity University Kolkata.

'non-moderns', simply on the basis of *capital-in-time*. The meteoric emergence of industrial societies accompanied by the simultaneous origination of 'ocular-centrism' (Levin), nationalisation, urbanisation, and disenchantment have given birth to a pathological mimesis of *illusory capital* which binds itself as the primary capital for survival. Ray has often managed to challenge the standardised definition(s) of 'modernity' and its predetermined bio-algorithms by situating a nationality of absence(s) and thereby, setting his own set of exponential graphics. According to Amartya Sen, "...the issue can be discussed only in more dialectical terms. The diagnosis of thought as 'purely Western' or 'purely Indian' can be very illusory. The origin of ideas is not the kind of thing to which 'purity' happens easily" (Sen 132). Ray's cinematographic lens seizes to capture the idea of 'progressive' ethics as a fixated cultural borrowing of the First Worlds. For Ray, the categorical notion of 'global progress' seems to justify itself on the basis of a separatist cognition where the narratives of the past form a semantic closure to the metaphysics of the present in determining global certitudes.

The Dilemma of Capital: Is it a Being or a Thing?

The black-and-white Satyajit Ray's silent film, *Two: A Film Fable* (1964), produced under the banner of *Esso World Theatre*, manages to successfully capture almost all the socio-political arenas of civilisation: capitalism, progress, war and peace in some twelve running minutes. Frequently considered to be the precursor to *Goopi Gyne Bagha Byne*, *Two* is a tale of two kids: one 'rich', tyrannical and trapped in a palatial house and the other 'poor', submissive and left loose in the fields. Here 'richness' and 'penury' are transitive indicators of bank balance and nothing else which, later in the film, gets a post-truth indexing at the hands of the director. The film starts off with a piece of monochromatic music with a child wearing a 'mickey mouse' hat bidding bye to a car. Ray directly jumps into his depiction of modernity as bearing a fleeting construct where the unit of the family gets substituted by the unit of a car, thereby reversing the trope of domesticity as having material organs without a cerebral cortex. The opening scene is quite symbolic of modernity's tryst with plastic materiality that believes much in the image of copies rather than a copy itself. The opening scene sets the film in motion by

exposing the complex symbiotic cultural embeddedness between economic materiality and social corporeality, between *having* and *being*, between black and white (which suits the tonality of the frame), and between bodies and machines. In this case, the modern subject (the 'rich' kid) has already been *twice* displaced from his eros and Ray provides plenty of images to go along with his critique of progressive modernity. The 'rich' kid is shown to be drinking cola which then becomes a sign of the child's interpellation into the global consumption process: cola is the *artificial capital* that gets embedded as 'class capital'. Ray introduces several material gimmicks in the film that surround the ecology of the 'housed' child as characteristic of a 'machinic' engineering of bodies: mickey mouse cap, electronic toys, air guns, toy weapons, toy robots, tower-like blocked structures, plastic trumpets and carbonated soft drinks. Here, the 'machinic' selfhood is shown to be providing a kind of 'over-assemblage', or negative assemblage, which is not quite similar to the prospective of a de-territorialised 'becoming' (Deleuze). The un-housed kid remains not just a subaltern prototype in the postcolonial space. His nomadic spirit is suggestive of a social prism, an ethical singular opening which mobilises a unique possibility of multiple free drives. In other words, the shabby kid reflects a multiconnected (porous) body that derives and distributes sense and affect from multiple social plateaus. The director probes into the modern's insatiable appetite for material consumption masquerading as materialist security which then becomes the socio-cultural superscript of the *material-as-rational*. Erich Fromm in *To have or to Be?* investigates the modern's Hamletian desire for materialist seduction which becomes a speaking subject in itself thereby replacing the body as the mind with objects as the futural diktat. In other words, Ray sets out to expose the modern's mystification of *capital-as-having* coupled with *thing-as-being* in no apologetic terms.

Despite possessing plenteous toys and 'modern' comfort items, the 'housed' (or, 'rich') kid lacks contentment and switches from one toy to the other in an attempt to fluidise his 'modern' desires into the capitalist organs of his times. He harbours violent nature and bursts balloons by lighting matchsticks and is seen to hit a plastic ball at random that resonates with the scene from *The Great Dictator* where Chaplin plays with a globe that symbolises *balloon-in-dreams*. The

repetition of the kid's actions with his plastic toys transmutes into a zombified lobotomy of masculinity which becomes suggestive of a *major* 'thingness' of modern spectacles, "The spectacle is capital to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image" (Debord 34). The 'rich' kid becomes entangled within the hyper aggression of his plastic excess that creates a sort of 'divide and rule' language within his *Bio*; the plastic toys acting as plastic beings start replacing his innate self (innocence) with *thingified* gratifications (plasticised seduction) and reconstitutes him within a toxic model of *capital excess*. The 'rich' kid is seen to carry a toy dagger tied around his waist and this image becomes important in linking violence to capitalism where Ray is not only critiquing the process of producing biopower (at will) but also the 'global' methodology of containing surveillance through the bodies of class tokens. The body of the child transmutes into a militarised tool of cultural conduct as an exposition of the 'greater' capital merit over the merit of flesh. In other words, the image carries hyperreal scripting of biopower onto the performative body, which is the body of the 'housed' child, so as to transfer the matter of flesh from an agentic (active) circuit to a passive despotic consumable item. In one scene, the 'housed' kid looks through a window with iron rails that becomes a reference point to the idea of *property-as-security*. The references to the 'rich' kid getting a structure-like security (house) while the 'poor' kid having a field to play upon and simultaneously managing to *be* an 'open' space points to the ontological conflict of 'having' and 'being' as polemical vectors of life. The house is cinematised as a jail compound and the items inside classify as 'global' prisoners (things). The 'housed' kid becomes symbolic of the hypostatisation of class and wealth as opposed to the 'un-housed' kid whose ecosophic fissures become his only valid armoury to outgrow the capital tentacles of his time(s). Ray points to the limits of wealth where plastic toys can be equated with the influx of plastic capital, or surplus machine labour, as a form of 'modern' aggressive infection. The 'housed' child gets infected by the super spreader of plastic capital where the capital endorses (and removes) his body as a speculative militant capsule. This cultural reification of the state is what the 'poor' kid escapes from by voluntarily situating outside the production of prosthetic capital. With plastic toys scattered all over the house and toys tripping over one another (a robot crashes the

Eiffel Tower block), the 'modern' kid is shown to carry a contagious socio-cultural virus, which is the virus of the *excess* capital. The excess latches onto a host (in this case, a tender subject) and becomes a performing agent in zombifying the 'rich' kid where 'richness' (*capital* as the ideational truth) becomes the automatic substitute for the 'lack'. The 'lack' becomes non-performing unless it gets the attributes of a performing *capital* or the performative *excess*. The 'rich' kid becomes a diseased specimen of a hypertrophic body that has been objectified by the 'modern' speculative capital. The 'housed' kid is imprisoned by the capital-driven gaze of technologised ethics. The 'rich' boy is an embodiment of hyper-consumerism like Tom in *Parks and Recreation*. Also, Ray throws in a limbo conflict of the haves: the image of the housed kid looking through the window into the open fields provides a cinempoetic metaphor for the longing for a nomad (Deleuze and Guattari introduce the idea of literary vagabondness in *Nomadology: The War Machine*) who wishes not to be further chained by the speech of *capital excess*.

Moreover, Pamela Haag establishes how guns originated as an essential part of American culture. Haag says, in the United States, "It was etched strongly by the character, ambition, and will of gun capitalists rather than by diplomats, politicians, generals, and statesmen" (Haag 29). William Morris, in *How We Live and How We Might Live*, analyses how national rivalry becomes the root cause of gunpowder and bayonet wars which are waged by civilised nations. Guns as corrective instruments of society have been considered as the basic cultural icon of America: beginning from the machine gun of Al Capone to the rifle of GI Joe. Until the advent of industrial culture, toys used to be formed of materials extracted from nature like clay, rock, wood and wax. Serving as a replica of reality to the child, toys became more popular when it was infused with mythologies. Hence, the idea of movable limbs, talking robots, spring-driven motors and air-guns hit the consumer market fast as a fascinating entry into the blossoming of the prosthetic machines which then justifies an outlay of billions for the market. In *Two*, toy artillery seems to dramatically aggravate the 'rich' kid's unconscious willingness to defeat his opponent (by all means) in order to sustain its hegemonic gaze.

Kids as Capital Bodies: A Modern Grant

Interestingly, the 'rich' kid performs all masculine attributes to acquire a panopticon-like effect over the 'other' that are materially embedded and deemed superior. His elaborate display of weapons, priced possessions, false moustache, rage and belligerence are noteworthy. The 'rich' kid's operation of his battery-run toys parallels a mnemonic fever, a global catastrophe, which Ray wishes to echo as a case for the 'dangers' of modernity. The kid's 'cold' pressing of functional buttons (of his monkey-toy) not only serves as a disturbing image of the hypostatisation of plastic corporeality in the global capital but also exposes a projective tension of the World War times. The boy's actions almost seem to link up with the infamous duty of Thomas Ferebee, the bombardier of Hiroshima. This mnemonic linkage is obviously very graphic in its memorial embeddedness where the director chooses a non-adult (pre-matured cognition) type for invoking a sort of eerie time travel that exposes the politics of forgetting (forgetting as an active action). But Ray does this with a cultural logic in mind: the child, at the very outset, is factorised as a carrier of familial scripts and is thereby forcibly erased off any innocence for that matter. This shifts the idea of the child as a gift of 'god' to a tool for the usage of socio-familial utility. Likewise, Ray delivers a stark contrast to the fallacy of richness in a property (involving the 'housed' kid) from the motion of an anti-Blakean lens with that of the nudity of the 'poor' kid as bearing a transformative power over the eugenics of capital class. Rollo May in *Power and Innocence* (1972) talks about the condition of child as having a purpose to serve both in terms of its 'pre-egoic' functionality and its ordinary responsibilities while seeking a masterly address to maintain its growth. In simple terms, a child serves as a propaganda machine for the familial polity much before the condition of pre-cognition sets in. Engels, in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1845), states that every childbirth is political as sex and performance are controlled by the state wherein the state becomes a dictator of economic and socio-cultural merit. For May, as for the director, the 'housed' kid merely performs an ideological militancy where there is a complete 'lack' of maternal canny; the 'poor' kid, however, has a genderless liminality in his approach to games, playfulness and ecosophic life.

Guattari reads the notion of ecosophy in *The Three Ecologies* as a non-deterministic approach to harmonise and interconnect ‘all that breathes’ (*All That Breathes* is a short film that got released in 2022 on Netflix and reflects upon Guattari’s ecosophic recyclable biodegradability between humans and non-humans.)

The gullible body becomes a trope over which (hyper)masculine signs are carved into and the preordained grammar of aggression is justified as phallic volatility. Pliant and prone to imbibe what it observes, a child’s mind is extremely receptive. R.W Connell’s gender-order theory recognises a structural verification on the topic of masculinised abilities (*ability-as-action*) that differs across culture, time and the individual. Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity is the execution of an empiricist practice that justifies man’s superior logic and validates the subjugation of the ‘lesser’ male. Men possessing guns and weapons exemplify the pathological order of power and language. Even the child’s mind and body (text and sub-text) fall prey to such perilous social compositions of masculinity and power. Rudyard Kipling clearly projects the intricacies of imperial masculinity in his works like *The White Man’s Burden* and *The Man Who Would Be King*, connecting masculinity to chivalry, conservatism and exploitation. Kipling encourages the English for war as discursive means to acquire peaceful reforms and herein lies the topic of a degenerate class of spiritual stasis. Through rationalisation of imperial and capitalist subjugation as a Machiavellian game, Kipling emphasises the pathological necessity of imperial masculinity as an anthropological requirement to welcome a distorted utopia, or, a fashionable dystopia. Ray portrays the ‘rich’ kid as a prototypical positivist Weberian organ in its application of technographic plastic weaponry whereas the ‘poor’ kid signifies human capital (*capital-as-labour*) that supersedes all ‘modern’ attention on the physical capital.

Resistive Capital: Corporeality of Silence

Throughout the twelve-minute film, the classed (‘rich’) kid is shown to be chewing gum non-stop. Later he sticks his gum on one of his toys’ heads which goes to show the *socio-plasticity* of necrophilic fever (orgasm for the ‘dead’ *plastic excess*) by the State and its

participants. The 'rich' class is shown to be absorbed in a hypostatic loop: at one level, the haves are seen to be blindly consuming the cannibalistic desires of the speculative capital and, at the other level, the haves are, in turn, getting subsumed by the state machinery and are thereby, getting spatialised into 'alienated everywhere-ness':

The alienation of the spectacle to the profit of the contemplated object (which is the result of his own unconscious activity) is expressed in the following way: the more he contemplates the less he lives; the more he accepts recognising himself in the dominated images of need, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires. (Debord 30)

The toys are given Dracula-like qualities in a way where the *plastic bodies* (corporeal things) consume the soul of the boy (soul with flesh) that can be seen as an attempt by the director to challenge the metaphysics of 'thingness' in things. Plastic toys are given corporeal cannibal-like bodies and the haves are seen to be motorless hypnotic objects. The classed bodies do not simply consume the illusion of plasticised futurity but, at the same time, are getting lost by a prosthetic lure of the 'capital turn'; the 'modern' ideas of *capital power* eat up the 'rich' kid as some sort of Faustian bargain. In a broader sense, the machinisation of a body into a despotic tool resonates with the image of the 'rich' kid as a repository of pre-scripted text that gets ready to be superscripted by its family and masculine institutions.

Produced during the Vietnam War, the film gains a greater symbolic significance to the larger humane cries. The film plays as a satire on technological advancement and political progress (progress for progress's sake) of a 'superpower' like the USA. The American aggression implemented on the Vietnamese destroyed numerous innocent peasants more than its political appendages. The photographs of the unarmed Vietnamese in *My Lai* being executed served as anti-war icons later. Dread of chemical weapons like Agent Orange and Napalm horrified the Vietnam civilians too. It rings true to Ray's cinematic intent. *Two* becomes a cautionary tale to the insinuations of unmitigated totalitarianism through military

assistance, technological aggression and capitalistic consumerism, giving birth to a world prone to war and unrest. Ray fears the worst: he warns his audience of a cybernetic space that germinates citizens genetically orchestrated by propagandist cyberian codes so that they engage in unrestrained impulse gratification by a process of lawful liquidation. *Two*'s pacifying message seemed crucial when war was sought at all costs. Such war-breeding ideologies under the veil of patriotism freeze people's sense to zero point, banning the use of logic which the 'Big Brother' does in Orwell's *1984*. Kipling's 'savage wars of peace' is a myth (321-323). Wilfred Owen writes, "The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est /Pro patria mori*", reversing Horace's idea of glorifying war (15). Bernard Shaw too satirises soldiers' delusional pride regarding war and military heroism in *Arms and the Man*. Ray's *Two* questions the citizens' cooperation with the state that propagates the termination of lives by manufacturing arms on the basis of geopolitical conditions and international affairs.

In the film, the un-housed ('poor') kid plays a musical flute which catches the attention of the jailed kid and immediately this 'openness' of the shabby kid disturbs the 'sanitised' kid, who is actualising a parody of *toxic capital*. Revengefully, the 'rich' kid plans to 'cut off' his soulful rhythm with the aid of a plastic flute. There is a stark contrast in the quality of tune which gets highlighted in the affective environment of the cinematic set-up: the plastic replica releases a cacophonous displacement that severs any possible relation between sound and mind. The 'poor' un-housed kid is suggestive of an alternative biodegradable rhizomatic free motor who has the grasses and the greens as his ecological allies (as having limitless green wealth) whilst ably pulling off his *sublime* knowledge for naturopathy. The 'rich' classed kid is shown to be living in a symbolic jail (house) with few of his plastic disposables whereas the un-housed kid enjoys an agrarian climate with tall grasses and dense fields at his disposal as a form of limitless expanse. The de-classed kid provides for his audiences a new kind of ecosophic assemblage where his body and spirit get spiritually linked to a deeper ingestion of 'ecocratic' capital, a space where *the flesh* of the greens and *spirit* of the humans co-opt and co-relate alternative *a-humanist* ethics (Skolimowski 34). In another scene, the 'free' kid plays a drum and its musical carnival hits the housed kid who, then, comically exposes

a battery-operated monkey-beating-a-drum toy to overpower his fear of the 'lack'. This is a painful sight for any civil body to grasp as the kid seems to be totally unaware of his psychological recuperation within the plasticity of simulacra (toy) that provides him with some virtual ecstasy of power. He himself gets commodified into a statist toy that vies for a macro-cognitive decay in return for 'total' obedience and Ray seems to be pinpointing out this point since the very first shot in the film. The 'poor' kid with the flute perhaps represents a Gandhian idealism of spiritual resistance and ahimsa against the cacophony of expensive toys. Also, it might be true that Ray's flute-child is an allegorical extension of John Lennon's musical protests against the Vietnam War. As the film ends with the tune of the child's flute, it seems to echo Lennon's 'Happy Xmas (War is Over)' and 'Give Peace a Chance'. The child's relinquishment of worldly affairs is his *Nirvanic* attainment. He provides a hermeneutic order of world peace, paying an eco-humane tribute to the martyred bodies of monks during the Vietnam War.

The symbol of masks in the film becomes very important in understanding both the characters' spatial logic; the mask performs a literary function in its context of understanding marginality and recognition. Since, very evidently, the idea of a subaltern voice has historically been identified as having the principle factor of a marginalised agency, much attention has been given to the semiotic detailing of 'marginalising by the haves' and not so much on the 're-marginalisation of the haves'. A unique feature of power-relation is that it cannot stand on its own merit; there has to be a producer and receiver of its agency. Thereby, it becomes necessary for the statecraft to find victims of the same kind, albeit in a different context altogether: the bodies that are being marginalised or are being pushed to the margins of desperation (de-classed bodies) are victims of state power while the bodies who feel are 'safe' (classed subjects) from being categorised as 'marginal' are bigger victims of instrumental polity without even having the slightest knowledge about it. This is how selective interpellation works. Also, the fact that the non-margins live in an illusion of 'having' ('having' as the promoter of *Being* in future(s)) and are thereby immune to any social parasite falls prey to a larger covert decay of *total merit*. This kind of psychosomatic breakage of both the master and slave due to a *plastic*

pull of the diffusive ‘spectacular capital’ (Debord, ch.1) is projected cinematically through the interplay of ‘two’ affective bodies on screen. The militant ‘hegemo-plastic’ games that the ‘rich’ kid ‘performs’ is socially, psychologically and economically futile and can never bring prosperity to the one exercising them. It is impracticable for a nation-state or a person to forcibly grab any land, wealth, trade or perseverance of others. Ray’s silent film portrays the ‘rich’ kid’s silent defeat that hits harder than his loud triumph. In the end, we hear the music of the flute entering the classed room through the window (and disturbing the housed kid). The scene points to the musicalisation of social fissures where the ‘poor’ kid welcomes an ecosophic multi-agentic nudity which challenges Darwin, probably, to a large extent. Subsequently, the window transforms into a liminal gateway that divides the two corporeal materials (the house and the fields) into Biblical expositions of Hell and Heaven. The soul of Ray resides in the flute-child that reverberates Denise Levertov’s message: “A line of peace might appear/ if we restructured the sentence our lives are making,/ revoked its reaffirmation of profit and power,/ questioned our needs, allowed/ long pauses...” (18-19).

Conclusion

Pete Seeger’s “Where have all the flowers gone?” is still sung as a protest against the conscription of the Vietnam War. William Cowper interrogates the superficiality of war between the countries separated by random geographical boundaries: “Lands intersected by narrow frith/ Abhor each other. Mountains interposed/ Make enemies of nations, who had else/ Like kindred drops been mingled into one” (Cowper 58). Weapon-industry proliferates due to the internationalism of war and is a transnational consequence of the capitalist economy. Bernard Shaw addresses the ramifications of the growing power of the weapon industry in *Major Barbara*. Interestingly, these industries, as an end in themselves, do not confirm any patriotic allegiance. The manner in which the plastic robot crashes the tower depicts the hollow mankind as a socio-gendered trope that destroys its creations by war: the disintegration of the toy tower becomes symbolic of the idea of a boxed-up body in a cage of fragile *plasticised modernity*. Also, in the end, the ‘rich’ kid shoots down a kite as soon as the ‘poor’ kid starts to

enjoy his time. This action is largely symbolic of a fear of flight from the Other. In other words, the haves seem to be caught up in Schelling's dilemma, and the classed subject quickly co-opts the power value as the needed machinic intervention of survival. The housed kid is shown to be satisfied only when he manages to limit the possibility of the other, and therein lies the de-plantation of the 'modern' soul. *Two ends* with a clear textual marker: the inadequacy of the housed kid to sustain himself with the machinic noises of his plastic toys sums up a failed idea of capital progress in exchange for marketing commodities. The 'modern' *plastic spectacle* has not only failed to affect (and impress) the Other but has also exposed its metaphysical inadequacy in its continual mode of *plastic consumption*.

Works Cited

- Arnot, William Morris: *The Man and The Myth*, 1964. [online] Marxists.org. Available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/arnot-page/1964/wm-morris/index.htm>. Accessed 05 January 2022.
- Band, Plastic Ono. *Give Peace a Chance*. Live Peace in Toronto 1969, Spotify, <https://open.spotify.com/album/7mXg4fLJHmnjAahH15Wsj?highlight=spotify:track:0sUQj8SfIMJrqJE7Z4u9o>.
- Buck-Morss, S. *The Dialectics of Seeing*. The MIT Press, 1989.
- Cowper, William. *The Task*. William Sharpe, 1822.
- Debord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle*. Black and Red, 1983.
- Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. B. Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
- Durkheim, Emile. *The Division of Labour in Society*. Free Press, 1893.
- Engels, Friedrich. *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. Penguin Classics, 2010.
- Fromm, Eric. *To Have or to Be?* Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013.
- Giddens, Anthony. *Consequences of Modernity*. Polity Press, 1990.
- Guattari, Felix. *The Machinic Unconscious*. Semiotexte, 2011.
- Haag, Pamela, *The Gunning of America*. Basic Books, 2016.
- Kipling, Rudyard. *Rudyard Kipling's Verse*. Doubleday, 1940.
- Larsen, Neil. *The Discourse of Power: Culture Hegemony and the Authoritarian State*. Institute for the Study of Ideologies and Literature, 1983.
- Leader, Elaine. *The Family in Global Perspective: A Gendered Journey*. SAGE, 2003.

- Lennon, John and Yoko Ono. *Happy Xmas (War is Over)*. Record Plant East, 1971. Spotify, <https://open.spotify.com/track/4k7iUsc23W5mKvifOaYWP5?autoplay=true>.
- Levertov, Denise. *Breathing the Water*. New Directions, 1987.
- Levin, David. *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*. University of California Press, 1993.
- May, Rollo. *Power and Innocence*. W. W. Norton & Company, 1998.
- Owen, Wilfred. *Poems*. Chatto & Windus, 1920.
- Ray, Satyajit. *Goopi Gyne Bagha Byne*. Purnima Pictures, 1969. *YouTube Movies*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kTgoDm1_BUI.
- Robinson, Andrew. *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye: The Biography of a Master Film-Maker*, London: I.B Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2004.
- Seeger, Pete. *Where have All the Flowers Gone?* The Rainbow Quest album (Folkways LP FA 2454), 1960. Spotify, <https://open.spotify.com/album/6QqGqoDZaSiUlw4JQEs5pc?highlight=spotify:track:0Kl6MoQqbE2brpdWcXrNe>.
- Sen, Amartya. *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity*. Penguin Books, 2005.
- Skolimowski Henryk. *Dharma, Ecology and Wisdom in the Third Millennium*. Concept Publishing Company Pvt. Ltd, 1999.
- Weber, Max. *On Charisma and Institution Building*. University of Chicago Press, 1968.



Reflection of Lord Modonmohan on the People of Bishnupur

Ramyajit Sarkar*

Abstract

Lord Modonmohan was the tutelary deity of the Malla dynasty of Bishnupur. Bir Hambir, the 49th king of the dynasty, took him to Bishnupur. The deity has been closely connected with the lives of the Malla kings of Bishnupur and also the common people of Bishnupur. The Malla family has thought of the deity as a symbol of their prosperity. Interestingly with the coming of Modonmohan, the dynasty prospered in every aspect, from the extension of the empire to the personal life of the kings and royal family. The deity has a large impact on religion, society, food habits, dresses, culture, administration, war techniques, and lifestyles. This paper looks at this relationship through a critical lens.

Keywords: Lord Modonmohan, Bir Hambir, Dalmadal, Gopal Singha, Ratna, Malla

Introduction

Raghunath Malla, the founder of the dynasty, founded the Malla kingdom in 694 A.D., and the Malla kings ruled the kingdom for thousand years. At first, the capital of the kingdom was Praddumnapur. During the reign of Jagat Singha, the 19th king of the line, the capital of the kingdom was transformed from Praddumnapur to Bishnupur. During the latter half of the sixteenth century, we can see the development of two kingdoms in India. One is the Mogul Empire which extended over a large part of India under the reign of the emperor Akbar, the third emperor of the line and the other one is the Malla dynasty of Bishnupur which extended a large part of the Chotonagpur plateau and almost the whole Rarh Bengal till the bank of the Subarnarekha River under the Malla king Bir Hambir. Though we should not compare these two kingdoms from their length, it is known that Bir Hambir was a friend of Akbar

* Independent Researcher

and his general Man Singha, who helped them to defeat the Afghans in Bengal (Chandra 136). With these political achievements, under his reign, the Malla kingdom saw a new change with the coming of Srinibas Acharya, an important Vaishnava saint of Bengal, in Bishnupur. Bir Hambir, with his queen Sulakshana took the new faith. A great transformation came to Bir Hambir. The warlord became a Vaishnava saint. During his reign, the idols of lord Modonmohan and Devi Radha came into Bishnupur. The coming of lord Modonmohan changed the course of history of the Malla kingdom, which I will be discussing below. During the reign of Gopal Singha, the kingdom faced an attack from Bargis, but Modonmohan compelled the attack. Chaitnya Singha was the last independent king of the Malla dynasty. During his reign, most parts of the kingdom were sold due to his failure to pay taxes to the British East India Company in time, and the kingdom was transformed into a small zamindari. Sree Sree Kalipada Singha Thakur was the last king of the dynasty.

Now when did the idols of lord Modonmohan and Devi Radha come to Bishnupur? During the reign of Bir Hambir, Srinibas Acharya, the great Vaishnava saint came to Bishnupur and Bir Hambir, with his wife Sulakshana, took Vaishnavism from him. Thereafter many Vaishnava temples were built all around Bishnupur, and many Vaishnava idols were taken to Bishnupur. Perhaps in this way, lord Modonmohan also came to Bishnupur. The story goes by that on his way back to Bishnupur from Vrindavan; he halted in a Brahmin's house for a night, where he saw lord Modonmohan. The king was very much attracted by the grace of lord Modonmohan. He sat near the idol and did not want to leave the place. But as he was a king of a large kingdom, he had to do many other works besides worshipping Gods. So he could not stay there for a long time. Then Modonmohan himself solved the problem. He came in the dreams of both the king and the Brahmin and told the king to take him to Bishnupur and forbade the Brahmin to make a bar to the king to take him to Bishnupur. The king, being very much pleased, took the idol of lord Modonmohan with him and reached Bishnupur and made arrangements to worship lord Modonmohan. The Brahmin became very upset and cursed lord Modonmohan that as he left the house of his poor disciple and went

to his rich disciple's house, one day, the Malla dynasty of Bishnupur would also reach in poverty, and lord Modonmohan had to leave Bishnupur forever though another tradition says that the king appointed the Brahmin as the royal priest of lord Modonmohan (Chandra 216).

After the coming of lord Modonmohan, king Bir Hambir, who was already devoted to Vaishnavism, totally surrendered his body and mind to lord Modonmohan. He stayed near lord Modonmohan most of the time. The whole Malla royal family became converted to Vaishnavism. Now some changes began to emerge in the Malla kingdom. Devi Mrinmoyee had been the tutelary deity of the Malla dynasty till lord Modonmohan came to Bishnupur. In fact, it is said that it was Devi Mrinmoyee who herself ordered Jagat Malla, one of the predecessors of Bir Hambir to build the Bishnupur city (Malley 26). It is said that, in earlier times, the idol of Devi Mrinmoyee was a fearsome Devi murti. In almost every festival around the worshipping of Devi Mrinmoyee, there were arrangements of offerings of animals. It is also said that, sometimes, people were also offered to Devi Mrinmoyee though these people were the antisocial elements of the Malla kingdom, who had got life sentences by the royal court or by the king himself. After defeating Afghans in the battle on the bank of Birai River, Bir Hambir gifted Devi Mrinmoyee a garland of heads of defeated soldiers. Another tradition says that he gifted the garland of heads to another idol of Devi Kali in the battle place. However, the story seems to be true as the battle place has been called as the "Mundamalar Ghat" (the bank of a garland of heads of people) (Chandra 142). But after coming of lord Modonmohan, he became the tutelary deity of the dynasty replacing Devi Mrinmoyee. Actually after converting the Malla dynasty including the king Bir Hambir into Vaishnavism, the Devi Mrinmoyee already started to lose her earlier status, lord Modonmohan took the status of tutelary deity from devi Mrinmoyee. In fact, the idol of Devi also changed from her fierce look to an affectionate mother who with killing Mahisashura and she is saving the Earth and the Heaven. In fact, many Vaishnava rituals added to the worshipping of Devi Mrinmoyee, replacing older rituals like human sacrifices near Devi.

The kingdom was mainly inhabited by people of lower class Hindus and outskirt people. They have their own Gods and Goddesses and their own religious faith and rituals. Vaishnavism and lord Modonmohan also made some changes in their religious belief also. Many of their gods and goddesses became semi-gods around lord Modonmohan and other Vaishnava deities. In this case, I want to mention a story. Though it is not directly linked with lord Modonmohan but linked with Vaishnavism. It is said that when Shyamananda went to Mayurbhanj, Rankini Devi, a Goddess of mainly outskirt people, took him as her guru. Some tribal gods have also become a form of lord Vishnu whose one form is lord Modonmohan. To worship lord Modonmohan and other Vaishnava deities, installed in the temples of Bishnupur, Kirtan, the community singing of the Gaudiya Vaishnavas, became popular in Bishnupur. There were two types of Kirtans. One was Nagar Kirtan, where people roamed the city singing Vaishnava songs with different types of instruments, mainly khol, kartal and others and the other one was the Kirtan which was generally held every day in Vaishnava temples. The Kirtan slowly broke the barrier between higher castes and lower castes people in society. The Malla kings, with the people of Bishnupur from all strata of the society, joined in the Kirtan. Chanting Vaishnava songs, either personally or with some people, became an aspect of the daily lives of the people of Bishnupur (Malik 90).

Dramas based on the life of lord Krishna were started to stage on. Bir Hambir, Gopal Singha and other Malla kings participated in these dramas. Slowly lord Modonmohan entered into every single thought of the people of Bishnupur. It is said that during the Rash festival, all Vaishnava deities of various temples of Bishnupur headed by lord Modonmohan were taken to the Rashmancha, built by Bir Hambir. Bir Hambir himself played a vital role in the dramas staged in front of lord Modonmohan. A beautiful story is there in Bishnupur around lord Modonmohan during the Rathayatra festival. It is said that Raghunath Malla I, one of the most important Malla kings after Bir Hambir, built a stone chariot for lord Modonmohan. Once on the day of Rathayatra, in spite of the effort of thousand men, the chariot could not be pulled out. At last, it was seen that an old woman, due to her age, could not reach the place before the

Rathyatra. She reached the place and slowly pulled the chariot with other people. The chariot began to roll out. This story may signify the thought that God is for all people of whom there is no distinction between poor and rich, between lower and higher castes which became the foundation philosophy of the Malla kings to rule the Malla kingdom of Bishnupur.

Cultural Impact

Reading Vaishnava scriptures became popular among the members of Malla royal family. Bir Hambir, after embracing Vaishnavism, wrote two Vaishnava lyrics. One of these is in honour of his guru Srinibas Acharya. The other one is to honour Kalachand, a form of lord Krishna or Modonmohan. Dhari Hambir, the eldest son of Bir Hambir and did not live long, also composed a Vaishnava lyric. Raghunath Singha, another son and successor of Bir Hambir, also composed two lyrics. Gopal Singha, one of the successors of Bir Hambir composed a complete Vaishnava kavya, i.e. the Krishnamangal Kavya. He also copied the Chaitnya Charitamrita of Krishnadas Kaviraj. Chaitnya Singha, the son of Gopal Singha and the last independent king of the dynasty, translated the Bidagdha Madhab of Rupa Goswami (Saha 188). A great change came in the society of Mallabhum. Where women of India in the medieval period were generally limited to households, Vaishnavism took the Malla women out of the household. It is true that the men and women of lower castes and outcastes of Mallabhum, due to their poverty, both worked in the field. But Vaishnavism took the women of both rich and poor families out of their households. Sulakshana, the queen of Bir Hambir, with other royal women of the Malla dynasty, listened to different interpretations of Vaishnavism from Ramchandra Kaviraj, one of the most important disciples of Srinivas Acharya (Saha 185). Dhajamani Pattamahadevi, the queen of Gopal Singha, copied the famous Premvilas of Nityananda Das. They also arranged local gatherings in every village where Vaishnava texts were recited to villagers. The feudal chiefs under the Malla kingdom built Vaishnava temples and Rasmancha in their areas. In fact, they also promoted local scholars to compose new literature and copied many Vaishnava Kavyas. Chaitnya Das of Chhabra village wrote a commentary on Joydev's Gitgovindo in

1794 A.D. During the reign of the Malla king Durjan Singh, Ramcharan Chakrabarty of this village translated the Aswamedhaparba of Mahabharata into Bengali. Kichakbadha, another manuscript by Niti Verma was copied in 1604 A.D. in Patpur village under the present Bishnupur police station. One Kavichandra of Peno village in the present Kotulpur police station was a court poet of Malla king Gopal Singha and translated a part of Mahabharata at the king's request. His narrative poem Govindamangal became famous during his time. An interesting note of the popularity of Vaishnava literature in the Malla kingdom can be found in the Maliara village. The Maliara village was ruled by a local Adhurya family under the Malla kings. Vidyavidhi, a local scholar of the Maliara village, had a personal library from where Vaishnava texts like Gitagovinda, and Chaitnyacharitamrita have been found. The prosperous village Ramsagar had a stone house of manuscripts, of which many of them have been taken to the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad of Bishnupur. So from the above instances, it can be easily understood how much development of Vaishnava literature occurred in the Malla capital Bishnupur and other places in the Malla kingdom. Rash, Dol and other Vaishnava festivals became popular. During Rathayatra, the kings and their subjects pulled Modonmohan in a stone chariot and travelled with him to Bishnupur.

A new type of card game, i.e. the “Dashavatar Tas” became popular where ten avatars of lord Vishnu replaced the traditional king, queen, mate and other forms of cards (Ghosh 698). It is said that Bir Hambir ordered Bhaskar Fauzadar, a person of Fauzdar family of Sankharipara of Bishnupur whose descendants have made these cards till date, to build these cards. The ten avatars of lord Vishnu were Matsya (fish), Kurma (tortoise), Baraha (boar), Nrisingha (whose upper portion of body is like a lion and the lower part of the body is like a man), Vamana (dwarf), Parasurama, Rama (Raghunatha), Balarama (the elder brother of lord Krishna), Buddha (Jagannatha) and Kalki (Chandra 284). This game took Vaishnavism to people's amusement. The making of Vaishnava God and Goddesses became a tradition in Bishnupur and other parts of the Malla kingdom (Ghosh 89). People, according to their financial ability, built Vaishnava idols though it is interesting to note that

most of the fine and large Vaishnava deities were gifted to the feudal chief and other officers appointed in different works by the Malla kings. The Vaishnava idols were made of clay, fire clay, stone, wood and different metals. Two very fine idols of Radha and Gobinda belonged to the Roy zamindar family of Patrabakhra, built of eight metals have to mention here, but they were stolen now, and new Vaishnava images built of brass have been there in the temple now. According to tradition, it was the Malla king Bir Singha or the Malla king Gopal Singha who gifted Madhab Roy or one of his successors Paramananda Roy, who were one of the generals of the Malla army. Even now, the people of Bankura district go to Bishnupur and buy the clay models of Modonmohan temple and lord Modonmohan with devi Radha. A new style of Hindustani music, i.e. the "Bishnupur Gharana" evolved, mixing Kirtans and local folk songs.

Political Impact

After the coming of Modonmohan, "ahimsa" or nonviolence, was disseminated in the Malla royal family and the common people. As the kings became Vaishnava, they lacked their interest in guarding the borders and increasing military power. The kings depended on lord Modonmohan more than their army to save their kingdom from attacks from outer enemies. After taking the Vaishnava faith, Bir Hambir was so devoted to the Vaishnava deities that he was kidnapped by Mughal army in a conspiracy of Suja and the zamindar of Burdwan. Even during the attack of Bhaskar Pundit, the Bargi leader, Gopal Singha, then Malla king, depended totally on lord Modonmohan. Even he ordered his troops not to advance towards enemies. He began to chant Vaishnava songs with the common people of Bishnupur throughout the city. It is said that lord Modonmohan himself fired the famous "Dal Madal" canon of Bishnupur and destroyed the enemy troop totally (Chandra 223). The story is beautifully mentioned in the "Modonmohan Bandana," an 18th century Vaishnava text written by Chaturmukh. The story goes by that:

Bhaskar name Bargi gar kari akramon
Mone kaila luthiba ei gupta Vrindavan.
Murshidaba Dhaka luthe elo Bishnupure

Devkhat gare prabeshite nahi pare.
Asi bela diprohore Mundamalar ghat

.....
Uchharole bolite lagilo Hari Hari.
Mahaprabur Sreemondire kore Haridhani
Bole rakho ohe damai Gunomani.
Bhakat batsal Prabhu janilo ontore
Raja praja dile bhar bargi tarabare.
Dekhite dekhite omni dhuli uraia
Ghora ek doure jai barabajar dia.

.....
Nija gar rakhile nije Modonmohan
Apar mahima tobo ke bujhite pare
Chaturmukh osomortho jaha barnibare.

(Mallik, 145-148)

It means that Bhaskar, a Bargi thought to loot the “Gupta Vrindavan” i.e. Bishnupur. They had already looted Murshidabad and Dhaka, but the fort of Bishnupur became inaccessible to them. During the time of noon, the bargis reached the Mundamalar ghat, but they feared to see the prepared canons. But they saw there was no one to fire these canons, so they thought that it would be easy to capture the city. When they were crossing the trench, one artilleryman saw them. He fired some gunshots towards them, but he became failure to shoot at his target and ran to Gopal Singha, then Malla king to warn him about the attack of Bargis. But the king did not order his twenty-two thousand soldiers to advance. He ordered all his people to chant the name of Hari, i.e. lord Modonmohan. All people of the kingdom, irrespective of kings and common people, prayed to lord Modonmohan to save them from Bargi attack. By their prayer, lord Modonmohan himself saved the fort from Bargi attack.

But as the kings slowly neglected the administration and their army, the kingdom showed attacks from outer enemies again and again. Kirtichand, the zamindar of Burdwan, once attacked the Malla kingdom. In fact, Siraj Ud Daula, after becoming the nawab, once sent an army to attack Bishnupur. The attack was repulsed but mainly for its inaccessible position and the past skills of the Malla

army. But it is clear that slowly the kingdom became weak, and during the reign of the British East India Company, due to their inability to give the settled tax by the company, the kingdom was sold. The idols of lord Modonmohan and Devi Radha were sold. Due to the financial crisis, Chaitnya Singha, the last independent Malla ruler, could not pay the tax to the British East India Company. With this problem, he faced another problem from his cousin Damodar Singha who at first wanted the royal throne of Chaitnya Singha and later half of the kingdom. To pay the tax and to pay his loan, which he had been taking to fight against Damodar Singha in the British court, he had to keep the idols of lord Modonmohan mortgage to Gokul Mitra, a merchant of then Calcutta (Chandra 209). As most of the land under the Malla kingdom were transformed into tax-free Devottar land for their gifting to Vaishnava saints, Brahmins and their official large number of tax-free land as Devottar property, the possibility to collect sufficient tax to pay the tax levied by the British East India company. Though after winning against Damodar Singha in the British court, Chaitnya Singha took his Modonmohan back, but the story goes that Gokul Mitra gave him a replica of the real idol of lord Modonmohan. In fact, thereafter, the idols of lord Modonmohan have been stolen many times. Though there are idols of lord Modonmohan and Devi Radha now in the Modonmohan temple, they are not the old idols.

Impact on Food/Habit

The Malla kingdom comprised a large number of lower caste and outcaste people. Before the coming of Modonmohan in Bishnupur, the kings and people of Bishnupur ate different types of meats and fish. On the day of Ekhan, kings went into Jungle to hunt. There were several scenes of hunting in the Vaishnava temples of Bishnupur, including the famous Modonmohan temple. But after the coming of Modonmohan, as they took nonviolence, they stopped killing animals. They became vegetarians. As they became vegetarian, slowly, they lacked protein in their body, which they had gotten from the meat of the animals. Though the Malla kings and their feudal kings tried to promote dairy foods, it perhaps did not get much success. Even now, there are very few meat shops in

Bishnupur, but in other parts of Bankura district, there are many meat shops. In the various festivals of Zamindar families of different parts of the Bankura district, who either got their zamindari from the Malla kings or Malla kings enforced them to be subordinate under the Malla kingdom like the Hazra zamindar family of Patrasayer, Simlapal zamindari family, offered a large number of animals. But the descendants of Roy zamindar family of Patrabakhra village under Bishnupur p.s. of Bankura district, who also got their zamindari from the Malla kings, have not given permission to enter chicken into their household. From the above examples, we can come to a conclusion that the places near the Malla capital of Bishnupur, which were under the direct influence of the Malla kings, obeyed the rules and regulations instructed by the Malla kings and the Vaishnavism and Lord Modonmohan had also a greater influence on them than the people of far areas from Bishnupur who might return to the ritual of animal offerings due to demand of their subjects through the passage of time. It is also clear that though there emerged a new cultural sphere in the Malla kingdom; the kingdom lacked its past chivalry.

Impact on Lifestyles

The people of Bishnupur started to be in a morning and evening prayer daily. A regular nagar Kirtan was in Bishnupur. They became honest. The rate of theft and other unsocial activities decreased. A French traveller Abbe Raynal writes that liberty and property were sacred in Bishnupur. Robbery, either public or private, was never heard of. When a stranger entered the city, he was under the Malla king's protection. The people of the Malla kingdom slowly developed the idea of nonviolence in their daily lives. Vaishnavism became everywhere in the lives of the people of Bishnupur. The sub-caste and outcaste people of the kingdom also slowly lost their old anger and cruelty and their habit of living separated from the other people who were out of their society. They became loyal to the Malla kings. In fact, they also developed some Vaishnava rituals in their own culture. The people of the Malla kingdom started to involve in the new cultural trend begun by the Malla kings, influenced by Gaudiya Vaishnavism and Lord Modonmohan. But sometimes, the people also became irritated as

Vaishnavism started to control their lives. The proverb "Gopaler begar" justifies it (Mallik 51). Gopal Singha ordered all his subjects to make a fast on the day of Ekadasi. He also ordered all of the people of his kingdom to chant the name of Hari every day before taking their supper. The common people began to ridicule it as "Gopaler begar". There is an interesting story related to this proverb, "Gopaler begar" in Bishnupur. Once, the Malla king Gopal Singha in disguise was travelling to Bishnupur city. Suddenly he came across an incident. A wife of a daily worker told her husband in the late afternoon to take his supper. Though he sat for taking supper, he quickly got up and told his wife to give him the garland of Tulsi (a garland which is made of dry seeds of Tulsi) to complete the "Gopaler begar" for that day. The king listened to all of their conversation and returned to his royal palace. The next day, he summoned the man to his royal court and asked about the whole incident. The man, being afraid, told the whole truth. Then the king gifted him some land to make him rid of his daily tension to collect his food daily as he could chant the name of Hari without any tension. Many songs and gathas were written by lord Modonmohan.

An important example of gatha is the "Modonmohan bandana". It was composed in the late 17th century. Some Malla kings also started to compose Vaishnava songs. Even some queens also started to compose Vaishnava songs. Bir Hambir and his queen Sulakshana were famous of them. Even many Vaishnava poets also emerged in Mallabhum. The Malla kings patronized them. In fact, Srinibas Acharya, the great Vaishnava scholar and his disciples got patronized by the Malla kings of Bishnupur. New types of temple architecture were started to be built. Ratna temples became popular as temples for worshipping the Vaishnava gods. The ek ratna temple style was own style of the Malla kings, and this style is shown in most of their temples. The ek ratna temples had some similar characteristics. The temples are with a single square tower on top of the temple. The single tower rests on a square building with a curved Bengali roof. The temples are generally made of stone and brick. The walls of the temple have a large number of terracotta panels depicting different types of scenes from the Ramayana and Mahabharata, Krishnaleela and various deities and many other scenes. The Modonmohan temple is the best example of ek ratna

temple (a temple with a single tower on its roof) (Chandra 216). In some cases, Chala temples were also built to worship the Vaishnava deities. Two important chala temples built in Bishnupur after the coming of Modonmohan to Bishnupur are Radhabinod temple and Radharaman Jiu temple. Both temples are Atchala temples. The first one was built in 1659 A.D. by the wife of the Malla king Raghunath Singha I in Kharbangla, and the later one was built in 1687 A.D. by Hemlata Devi, the daughter of Srinibas Acharya, in Goswamipara with the help of the Malla kings. The deul style of temple architecture was slowly replaced by Ratna and Chala temple architecture styles. The two small deul temples near Gar darja are of the sixteenth century. Though both temples have no deity in the sanctum, local people believe that the temples are of Krishna and Balarama. If we consider the earlier deul temples of Bankura district like the Siddheswar temple of Bohulara with these two temples, we can easily understand how the deul temples, from their earlier large form took small form in the days of later part of Malla kingdom mainly after coming of Vaishnavism into the Malla kingdom.

Modonmohan Temple

The Modonmohan temple was built by the Malla king Durjan Singh. The temple was built in 1694 A.D. The south-facing temple is 35 feet high and 40 feet square (Chandra 218). It has a single shikhara on a chala roof. It was built of bricks. The temple has three archways on the east, west and south side. The outer walls and inner walls of the temple have a large number of terracotta panels. The terracotta sculptures of the Modonmohan temple represent how the transformation of faith took place in Mallabhum from pre-Malla age to the coming of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, especially Lord Modonmohan. The upper portion of the temple is decorated mainly with battle scenes, like the scenes from the battle of Kurukshetra of the Mahabharata. On the lower part of the temple, there are terracotta panels depicting animals, hunting scenes and fighting between animals. The pillars of the temple bear attractive terracotta motifs of kirtanias and khol and kartal musicians (Chandra 220). One of the most interesting sculptures of the Modonmohan temple is the scene of navanarikunjar where eight sakhis of Radha and Krishna take the position of an elephant

together, and Devi Radha and Lord Krishna are on the back of the elephant.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, we can easily understand that the impact of the coming of Lord Modonmohan was in every sphere of the lives of the people of Mallabhum. It is interesting to note that with his coming to Bishnupur, the city's prosperity reached its peak, and with his mortgage to Calcutta, the prosperity started to decline. Coming of Modonmohan to Bishnupur made the Malla kingdom proper in cultural aspects in Bengal and the rest of the world. But on another side, it decreased the military power of the Malla dynasty. In spite of twenty-two thousand soldiers in his army, Gopal Singha did not give them a chance to fight with Maratha Bargis. And with donating most of the land as Devottar property, Malla kings closed the ways to develop their financial condition and its consequence, they had to suffer through selling most of their property of them to bidders by the British East India Company and remained as titular king to the people of Bishnupur.

Works Cited:

- Chandra, Manoranjan. *Mallabhum Bishnupur*. Mitra And Ghosh Publishers, 2002.
- Ghosh, Benoy. *Paschimbanger Sanskriti*, Vol. 1. Prakash Bhaban, 1950.
- Malley, O', L.S.S. *Bengal District Gazetteers Bankura*. The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1908.
- Mallik, Pada, Abhaya. *History of Bishnupur Raj*. Kuntaline Press, , 1921.
- Saha, Prabhat Kumar. *Some Aspects of Malla Rule in Bishnupur 1590-1806*. Ratnabali, 1995.



The Theme of Friendship in the *Hitopadesa*

Richa Joshi Pandey*

Abstract

The current paper studies the theme of friendship in the *Hitopadesa*. Friendship is a prominent theme in the *Hitopadesa*, and its stories provide the framework for many kinds of friendship. Since the text is largely written in the context of statecraft, friendship is encoded predominantly as diplomacy between inter-state and intra-state actors. Alternatively, as exemplified in the stories, friendship is also an aim and an end in itself. Friendship is an aspect of cultural heritage that is to be welcomed and enriched insofar as the ecological balance of the world as one family is concerned. The current paper argues that the *Hitopadesa* tends to interweave two threads together: one, the theoretical aspects of friendship based on philosophical and ideological assumptions premised on balance between *dharmayuddha* and *kutayuddha*, and the other, that lies post-theory within the affective, spontaneous and practical aspects of specific friendships between individuals.

Keywords: friendship, niti, *dharmayuddha*, *kutayuddha*, *dharma*

The *Hitopadesa* was composed sometime between 800 and 950 CE by Narayana, who was a Lord Shiva-devotee, a court poet in the court of Dhavala Chandra in eastern India, a grammarian as well as a philosopher. Translators of the *Hitopadesa*, along with literary historians, have argued that the *Hitopadesa* contains extracts from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Puranas, the Panchatantra, the *Arthashastra* and the Nitisara. The current paper studies the theme of friendship in the *Hitopadesa* using The Penguins Classics translation of Narayana's original *Hitopadesa* by A.N.D. Haksar, as the primary text. At the start and end of the *Hitopadesa*, the philosophy of ecological one-ness, connectedness and continuity is re-iterated in the phrase "vasudhaiv-kutumbakam" (71-2), which is taken from the

* Assistant Professor, Department of English, School of Languages, Doon University, Dehradun, India

Maha Upanishad or the *Mahopanishad*. *Hitopadesa* belongs to the genre of “nidarsana katha” or a “story which aims to teach by exemplum and is often satirical” (Haksar xii). The main plot involves the central protagonist, Visnu Sarma’s attempt to educate the young sons of King Sudarsana, at the latter’s behest. A series of interwoven and nested stories, including bird and beast fables, that exemplify *niti* and *dharma*, lie within the main text of Visnu’s Sarma’s lessons to the princes. The *Hitopadesa* skillfully organizes a lesson plan for the young princes in four sections: *Mitralabha* (Gaining Friends), *Suhrbheda* (Splitting partners), *Vigraha* (War) and *Sandhi* (Peace), that ultimately comprise the entire work. The current paper argues that the *Hitopadesa* tends to interweave two threads together: one, the theoretical aspects of friendship based on philosophical and ideological assumptions premised on the balance between *dharmayuddha* and *kutayuddha*, and the other, that lies post-theory within the particular, emotional, affective, spontaneous and practical aspects of specific friendships between individuals, involving individual psychological states, within the family as well as community life, at large. The current paper shows that though these two threads of friendship are often bound together in nebulous and liminal ways, it is in the instances of gaining and separating friends that one’s proficiency in *niti* and *dharma*, as *kshatradharma*, may be put to the test. Thus, the ruler’s exercise in friendship must display a strategic as well as emotive discernment between commitment and caution while practising *dharma* and exercising *niti*.

Friendship is a prominent theme in the *Hitopadesa*. The stories provide the framework for many kinds of friendship. Since the text is largely written in the context of statecraft, friendship is encoded predominantly as diplomacy between inter-state and intra-state actors. Alternatively, as exemplified in the stories, friendship is also an aim and an end in itself. It is part of a heritage that is to be welcomed and enriched insofar as the ecological balance of the world as one family is concerned. Friendship is specifically concretized in the exercise of *niti* and *dharma* within the ambit of kingship and rule. On the one hand, the princes must learn rational lessons about whom to befriend and whom not to so that the natural rule of *dharma* and the dictum of *niti*, may prevail, be energized and expediently put into practice within the context of the lived realities of social and political

life. On the other hand, there is a philosophical recognition of and an emotional appeal towards friendship, per se, in terms of its basic structure and its many facets that correspond to and energize the global egalitarian ethic of *vasudhaiv kutumbakam*, while building consensus amongst various stakeholders. The first section, *Mitralabha*, theorizes four kinds of friendship: based on blood, based on family, based on hereditary traditions and based on some calamity (Haksar 64). Here, the discussion on friendship ramifies into a detailed discussion on the productive realization of the *purusharthas* of *dharma*, *artha* and *kama*, through meaningful friendships with others. Evidently, within the scope of the *Hitopadesa*, firm friendships can guarantee success in life, which in turn, is channelled through *dharma*. *Dharma* is a Sanskrit word that has had a seminal presence in ancient Indian philosophy, religion and culture. Charles Malamoud explains the objective and social valence of the term *dharma*: "...*dharma* is at once the universal order, the system of norms that expresses it and the totality of observances to be performed by individuals and groups, according to their statutes, in order for this system of norms to be maintained" (38). *Dharma*, within the Bhagvat Gita framework, guarantees ontologically in-built relationship networks within the *varnasrama* framework, where the individual must selflessly follow one's own *dharma*, also called *svadharma*. Drawing upon the work of C.J. Chacko, Modh argues that along with *rajadharma*, "Hinduism also provides norms of *Desa Dharma* that govern inter-State relations" (2). According to Pradeep Kumar Gautum, *dharma* is also explained in terms of political realism within the *Arthashastra* where "*Artha* (material wellbeing) is always moderated by *Dharma* (moral, ethics). Thus, concepts of *dharma* and *artha* are not separate silos and they do not talk past each other but with each other" (31).

In an article titled, "Norms of war in Hinduism", Kaushik Roy traces the genealogy of *dharmayuddha* (righteous and just war) and *kutayuddha* (unjust war) from the Vedic era through the great epics to the post-Kautilyan era till 900CE. He argues that military details can be traced as far back as the Rig Veda. Both the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, depict war-related conflicts that may be taken to support both *dharmayuddha* and *kutayuddha*. Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, composed around 300 BCE, Roy says, is a realist in

political and military terms rather than moralist or religious terms. Though Kautilya advocates *dharma* as the duty of the King, he also promotes *kutayuddha-vikalpa*, whose basic components are “intrigues, duplicity, fraud” (Roy 36). In the post-Kautilyan era, Roy suggests that Kamandanka, who wrote the *Nitisara*, which is a text which greatly influences the *Hitopadesa*, may not have subscribed to Kautilya’s allowance for violence, but he too emphasized strategic warfare. Later, Manu’s *Manusmriti* (The Laws of Manu) came as a challenge to Kautilya’s concept of *kutayuddha*. In fact, in his bid to “articulate an eternal science of politics” (Roy 38), Manu specifically emphasizes and builds upon *dharmayuddha* as a “normative model” (Roy 121). Furthermore, Roy expositis that with the passage of time, the debate around the use of just and unjust means of war became linked with the respective military and strategic goals of the king-conqueror. Speaking of the *Hitopadesa*, Roy argues that “the *Hitopadesa* offers a coda that includes elements of both *dharmayuddha* and *kutayuddha*” (40). Moreover, insofar as *dharma* conjoins the natural and the moral order (Mahadevan 320), it is a comprehensive and legitimizing concept. In the *Hitopadesa*, natural friendships, sanctioned on traditional and hereditary lines, are promoted and legitimized, while unnatural friendships, that is, those friendships that do not have the sanction of tradition and heredity, are declaimed but also paradoxically acknowledged and upheld on temporary and contingent lines. The fables that declaim and caution against unnatural friendships are underpinned by a logic of species diversity and categorization.

Many friends of every “mould” are likely to be a shield against fate’s uncertainties and life’s vicissitudes (Haksar 53). Thus, while inter-species friendships are encouraged on symbiotic lines, caution and care must be exercised while fulfilling the demands placed by friendships. Arguably, friendship frameworks envisioned within the macro and microscope of the *Hitopadesa*, point towards richer and subtler threats to public and private relationships as well as species/group sustenance. The *Nitisara* and the *Arthasashtra*, are texts that have been found to influence the stories of statecraft in the *Hitopadesa*. Evidently, both these texts profoundly influence the *Hitopadesa* in the priority accorded to the three powers or shaktis. These shaktis include the “mantra-shakti, the power of counsel and

diplomacy; *prabhav-shakti*, the power of the army and treasury; and *utsah-shakti*, the personal energy and drive of the ruler himself” (Gautam 119). Arguably, the *Hitopadesa* envisions friendship as something that must be socially engineered by the King, who exercises *rajadharma* as *kshatradharma* and manages to manifest friends in order to preserve and perpetuate *rajadharma*. Thus, friendship is evident in timely, friendly and sound counsel for the exercise of *mantra-shakti*. At the same time, friendship inheres in the rulers’ own *utsah-shakti* that can inspire *prabhav-shakti* or the ability to garner diplomatic relationships and support from others as evidence of the King’s own strength/dependability. *Niti* should preferably be based on *dharma*, and the latter is always realized and enacted from the liminal position between an ethic of charity and an ethic of safety; thus, charity is recommended insofar as personal safety is guaranteed first. Together, the two ethical positions constitute the pillars of friendship between creatures, thereby guaranteeing social harmony. Friendship theoretically signifies certainty, assurance, dependability, not only in this life but also in the afterlife, as a result of the cumulative merit of one’s own virtues of life. Alternatively, friends have to be discerned strategically and spontaneously. For example, the friendship between the prey and its predator is unnatural and is, therefore, impossible. In *Mitrabha*, for example, Visnu Sarma starts by narrating the tale of four friends; a crow, a tortoise, a mouse and a deer. *Laghupatanaka/Quickflight*, the crow, is a live witness to the story of Citragriva/ spotted throat, the pigeon and his friends. A trapper lays a bait, Citragriva warns his brood against the “lure of this rice bait” by narrating the story of the traveller and the tiger, where the traveller is killed by a tiger for prey (Haskar 16). This nested story involves the traveller’s greed for a gift by the tiger whose “basic nature (and) ... innate predisposition” is “to prey on every man” and that as a “clawed and horned creature(s) ... one should not trust their (its) nature(s)” (Haskar 18, 20). Choosing to ignore the natural and friendly warning of “old men” against hypocrisy and deception, the group of pigeons, in fact, follows the advice of a fellow pigeon. They start eating the rice and are trapped. The lesson learnt here is that “When misfortunes are on their way, friends too become the cause, they say” (Haskar 23). The incident validates another rule of nature through the reassertion of *dharma*, as in the *Manusmriti*, which propounds that it is a sin to disagree with a

teacher. Another story, narrated by the crow, about Dirghakarna, the cat, and Jaradgava, the vulture, in turn, validates the danger and impossibility of friendship between the predator and prey.

However, the story problematizes the predator-prey/friend-foe relationship within the political ecology of Grddhakuta, the hill inhabited by the predatory vulture and other non-predatory birds, who live together on a giant fig tree. The other birds know about Jaradgava's handicap; the vulture is blind and lacks claws and thus poses no danger to the birds' offspring, thereby modifying his status as natural predator-foe. In fact, other birds share their food with Jaradgava, who, in turn, guards their young. This is the caveat that legitimizes an otherwise unnatural friendship. When Dirghakarna, the cat, enters this habitat and threatens the young birds, it feels threatened by the vulture, in turn. The cat's deception and hypocrisy are masked by and embedded within his rhetoric of individual versus species trait, where the coda for racial integrity and identity is ultimately vindicated: "Is mere race a sufficient reason/ For anyone to praise or murder; Not conduct, the criterion/ In deciding death or honour?" (Haskar 31), is an appeal the cat makes to the vulture, shifting the burden of moral choice on the latter in a bid to foreclose any distrust/doubt regarding the cat's ulterior motive of preying upon young birds. Evidently, the cat's maxim on friendship is devious and philosophical; friendship, he claims, is a metaphor for the human soul and the most superior form of human virtue, that guarantees its presence even in the afterlife "One friend alone will follow you/ When you pass to death's dominion" (Haskar 33). The vulture's initial doubt is justified on the lines of species behaviour: "cats like meat" (Haskar 33), the vulture argues. Ultimately, the predator's deception and subterfuge are successful. The cat kills and devours the young birds and then slinks out of the habitat. The angry and distraught bird parents conclude that their young have been eaten up by the vulture, which is then attacked and killed for his alleged crime. Thus, the vulture's unnatural friendship with the cat as well as the other non-predatory birds turns out to be a catastrophic choice, and he loses his life at the hands of his friends-turned-foes whose anti-predator instincts, long dormant while the vulture was not perceived by them as predator, are activated on instinct. The moral of the story, says the crow, is that "shelter should never be given to one (like the cat) whose

family and character (that together constitute the natural) are unknown” (34). This is an orientation, a prelude, to what shall follow in the latter half of the *Hitopadesa*—an exemplum for the acknowledgement of *kutayuddha* intermingled with *dharmayuddha*, both kinds of war subsumed within the larger code of *dharma*.

At this stage, another argument is made for and against the nature of friendship: Is friendship governed by nature and its laws that appreciate species-specific behaviour embedded within the primal binary that contrasts predator from prey, such that whether two individuals can be friends will entirely depend on their species/ class affiliation or is it something holistic and non-binary based on a universalist and ascetic logic of "the world itself a family" with individual "conduct and behaviour" that must always already ethically testify to friendship as a natural default mode within the *vasudaiv kutumbakam* framework (Haskar 35)? Without the natural orientation and impulse for friendship and what it entails—cooperation, trust and consensus building—the essence of life within the *vasudaiv kutumbakam* ethic, would be inoperable. Without the vulture’s unswerving service and their mutual trust, for example, the birds would have had to incur a heavy burden in carrying out their daily chores while their babies’ safety was unassured. It is only when the vulture is earnestly convinced about the innocence of the cat beyond reasonable doubt, does he lower his guard. Moreover, while the trust between unlikely friends (the birds and the vulture) lasted and benefitted both sides, it was based on affective and emotional ties and not on strategic and hereditary knowledge systems. Yet, friendship is always already predicated on the presence of its opposite, which is enmity. In order to take this argument forward, it may be argued that as the stories moralize, friendship is fluid. Friends often turn into foes and vice versa. As suggested in the story of Viravara and in the story of the crow Cloudcolour, respectively, the stranger may turn out as either friend or foe. Evidently, friendship is both an individual as well a generic virtue/concept. Certain kinds of friendship are natural, traditional, hereditary and hence expected, while certain others are unnatural because tradition and the hereditary evolution of species do not sanction them. Natural friendships stand the test of time and are dependable but unnatural friendships are also possible and gainful. For example, Golden, the mouse’s unnatural

friendship with Quickflight, the crow, gives him access to a new habitat, near the lake *Karpura Gaura*, and new friends, whom he can help and live in harmony with, rather than be dependent as a pest on stolen crumbs in the house of the monk Cudakarna.

Arguably, the *Hitopadesa* addresses this gap in understanding the concept of friendship by re-mapping and re-calibrating friendship within the confluence of the web of life collective and the species collective, which are, ultimately and in the last instance, subject to being tested upon individual action. Thoughts, speech, and character traits must culminate in *karma* or action, whether in the context of *kutayuddha* or *dharmayuddha*. Interestingly, Arthur Llewellyn Basham compares the Manusmriti with the *Hitopadesa*, in that both these texts “bear(s) witness to and deplore(s) the existence of fatalist views” (282). Thus, certain enduring character traits are desirable in potential friends because they guarantee *karma*, contingent upon the specific time, space and manner of carrying out action:

Courage, devotion, courtesy,
Constancy in joy and grief,
Trust, sacrifice, integrity,
Are of friends the virtues chief. (Haksar 41)

Therefore, befriending a person who has the qualities enjoined by *dharma* is strategically and politically reassuring. In accordance with the principles of *dharma*, in terms of *kshatradharma*, which is just and righteous warfare, when open battle or *prakashyayuddha* is waged, *dharmayuddha* itself is exemplified. Cogently, *dharmayuddha*, as per the Bhagvad Gita, is “waged only by the Kshatriyas because only a Kshatriya has the qualities of courage, consistency, resourcefulness, generosity, leadership ability and a noble mind” (Roy 33).

Alternatively, certain individual character traits are inimical to potential friendships. These traits are contrary to the potential demands of *karma*:

He can’t keep secrets, importunes,
He’s fickle, false, to anger given,

Gambles, cold in misfortunes,
A friend is blemished by these seven. (Haksar 41-42)

The predator, for example, befitting his species-specific behaviour of deviousness, cunning and covetousness for prey, often espouses lofty and righteous ideals in pursuit of friendship, with the ulterior motive of ensnaring his prey once proximity is guaranteed. Could this possibly be a signal to the aspiring ruler, whose *rajadharma* would be to protect his subjects and their interests, and therefore, his territory? When the jackal Kshudrabuddhi or Dimwit wishes to befriend Citranga or Spotted One, the deer, the latter's friend Goodwit, the crow, warns him by narrating the above-mentioned story of the Cat and the Vulture. The jackal's argument, like the cat, is lofty: "The large-hearted have always thought/ The world itself a family" (Haskar 35). The deer's choice to ignore his friend's warning against the jackal's species-specific behaviour and what should have been his own species-specific behaviour, to flee/ startle from the predator, on instinct, is a catastrophic choice. The deer remonstrates that:

No one is by nature
Another's friend or foe
'Tis conduct and behaviour
Which always makes them so. (Haskar 35)

Sadly, the deer is tricked by the jackal into entering a farmer's field of corn. The jackal has a sinister plan. The deer, he plans, shall be trapped and killed by the farmer, and consequently, the leftovers shall go to the jackal himself. The deer is, in fact, eventually trapped by the farmer due to the machinations of the jackal. Fortunately for the deer, his friend, the crow, locates him and devises a scheme to rescue him from the farmer's trap. Thus, it is the crow's friendship that gives a new lease of life to the deer. The moral of this story is stated by its narrator, Golden, the mouse: "love between the predator and prey can end only in disaster" (Haskar 38).

Alternatively, another moral of this story, as it resonates with the other sections of the *Hitopadesa*, is that it is important to have friends of different kinds and that interspecies friendships are necessary

compensations for species-specific and individual character traits in order to meet the diplomatic as well as deterministic demands of particular war/combat/ life-threatening situations. Like in the other sections, in *Mitralabha* too, the idea of *niti* is underscored with the object of gaining friends of all kinds and with different proficiencies. Their counsel is invaluable both for self-preservation and to ensure safety from enemies and for being able to live in harmony. Arguably, the *Hitopadesa*'s bird and beast fables underscore *dharma* in cosmic terms as it is re-enacted within the human coda of righteousness. Thus, through the ability to gain (*mitralabha*) and lose friends—or, in other words, orchestrate *bheda*—human virtues inscribe the morally good from the morally evil, in the cosmos, at large.

Similarly, when Golden narrates his story and expresses his “good fortune” at having Quickflight for a friend in the forest where “in contentment lies felicity” (Haskar 54, 55). Slow, the tortoise, proffers a willing audience and candid counsel: “You hoarded too much,” he tells Golden (Haskar 55). As warning, Slow recounts the story of The Greedy Jackal. According to Roy, *dharmayuddha* is characterized by its defensive nature and while, Manu extolls the importance of forts in warfare, “Even Kautilya, the most vigorous proponent of *kutayuddha*, argues against a strategic offensive policy. The *vijigishu* or conqueror-king is advised to confine his activities within the subcontinent” (38). Mohan Kumar Sinha argues that Hinduism has traditionally stressed the importance of humaneness and moderation in war-related aggression and the recourse to negotiation and defensiveness as the principal means of resolving conflicts so as to limit unnecessary injury to one's vanquished adversary. Amongst other texts like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, Sinha, too, draws upon Kautilya's *Arthashastra* to support his argument, claiming that the “ideals of humanitarianism of ancient India the laws of war were more progressive” than modern laws of war (Sinha 293).

In the *Hitopadesa*, greed is against the dictum of *dharma* and leads to the death of the hunter, the deer, the boar, the snake and Girgharva or Loudcry, the jackal, in “The Greedy Jackal” (Haskar 57), either due to their own greed or that of their attacker. He also offers spiritual counsel against hoarding as a form of *adharma* and

kuniti: “To worthy people what you give,/ And that on which you daily live,/ That alone your wealth I merit; / The rest you guard, others inherit” (Haskar 58). In time, Golden, too, offers friendly and sound counsel to Slow. When the friends decide to flee from their current habitat due to the presence of hunters in their forest, Golden warns Slow about the latter’s vulnerability on land by narrating two tales. The first tale, “The Merchant’s Bride” (Haskar 65), is about the Merchant, Charu Datta and his bride Lavanyavati. Prince Tungabala fulfils his lust for Lavanyavati by tricking her foolhardy husband, who thinks the prince will endow her with wealth and jewels and then let go of her. Ultimately, the distressed merchant Charu Datta, is helpless because the situation is neither conducive for revenge, nor for redeeming the cuckolded husband. In another tale, “The Elephant and the Jackal” (Haskar 67), too, due to his own foolhardiness, the mighty elephant is tricked by a jackal and drowned in a mudbank, before being devoured by jackals. In either case, both Charu Datta and Camphorhead, the elephant, lack good friends and counsel, which would have saved them from harm. Unfortunately, Slow, too, makes the catastrophic choice of ignoring Golden’s good advice. As a result, he is seized by a hunter. At this stage, Golden says:

In joy and grief a partner sure,
Such a friend is hard to find...
Fear-weather friends, for money yearning.
For judging if they are sincere,
The touchstone is a crisis burning. (Haskar 71).

Together, the four friends hatch a plan to rescue Slow. The story has a happy ending with new and enduring company of friends in the forest, who offer good counsel and safety and security to each other.

The third section *Suhrbheda* or splitting partners, again takes up the idea of unnatural friendship. Visnu Sarma’s previous lesson to the young princes about negotiating friendly alliances is followed by a lesson in learning how to split/separate (*bheda*) existing friendly alliances by exploiting the nature and extent of fault lines and deep-rooted discontent between friends. The story revolves around the lion Pingalaka or Tawny’s unnatural friendship with the bull Sanjivaka or Lively. This unlikely friendship is split up due to the machinations of

two jackals, Karataka or Rusty and Damanaka or Bossy, who serve Tawny.

After a fall, Lively, has been abandoned in the jungle by a travelling merchant, Vardhamana. He recuperates in the forest and one day, he is spotted by Tawny, who has never seen a bull before. Ironically, Tawny is startled at the sight of the strange bellowing creature. This situation is exploited by Rusty and Bossy. Rusty argues that they should let matters rest by informing Tawny that Lively, is a bull after all, a natural prey for Tawny. But Bossy chooses to exploit the master's vulnerability. What appears to be intervention to Bossy, is deemed as interference by Rusty and a moral case in point is made.

Meanwhile, Rusty narrates two stories that prove the moral and strategic problem of interfering. His story about the meddlesome monkey is the tale of a curious and meddlesome monkey whose "testicles were crushed, and he died" (Haskar 85). The other story, he narrates, is about the ass whose unflinching servitude was tragically misconstrued as intrusiveness by his master, who thrashes his loyal servant instead of recognizing his loyalty.

Bossy tells Rusty, "I know the cause of his fear. That was only a bull bellowing. Bulls are even our prey, what to say of the lion's" (Haskar 99). Soon, Bossy solicitously broaches the subject of his master's perplexity before the latter and offers to arbitrate in the matter. He feeds off the fear and threat that both Tawny and Lively harbour for each other. In the process, like "The Canny Procureess" (Haskar 102) and unlike "The cat which became Superfluous", two stories recounted by Bossy to support his argument, he exaggerates and elevates his own role in brokering a deal whereby the "immense ... (and) very powerful ..." (Haskar 102) unknown beast Lively, now in a tame avatar, is "conducted and presented to the king (Tawny)" (Haskar 103), for the rest of their days. However, once Lively assumes the status of a treasurer, who guards the treasure-kill made by Tawny, the former displaces the jackals, who are now faced with an existential crisis, as their roles are now redundant in the eyes of their King. Clearly, Lively is a vegetarian and keeps the King's kill safe from the jackals, who are now under the scanner of suspicion as they, like Tawny, are carnivores, after all. Ultimately, the jackals

orchestrate a devious plan where they convince both Lively and Tawny about the threat that they present to each other. A great battle ensues between the bull and the lion and Lively is ultimately killed by the lion.

Like in the previous section, the nature of friendship is deliberated upon, particularly in the context of whether friendship between individuals is based on the traditional/hereditary context of species-specific predator-prey behaviour, which apriori determines friend from foe, or is it incumbent upon the moral character of specific individuals. Thus, Rusty argues that:

By nature none show benefaction,
Be villainous to or sympathize
With another. It's his action
Which exalts man or otherwise. (Haskar 90)

Moreover, Rusty argues, "A real friend indeed is he, / Who has no insincerity" (Haskar 121). Arguably, Rusty is the voice of conscience. As his master's true servant, he refrains from overstepping his brief. He champions the terms of his devout employment to Tawny—"to scout for game" (Haskar 87) and warns his friend against service which may be perceived by the master as meddlesome, ill-timed and inappropriate or show concern which is out of place. Alternatively, he is slow to act, displays a lack of effort and resolve. Left to his own predicament, he would have lost his job at Tawny's court. Bossy, on the other hand, is greedy, ambitious, proactive, inquisitive, sagacious, glib and more discerning of his master's body language, gestures and potential responses. He can use lofty philosophical ideals to pitch his ulterior and nefarious motives. However, he can be reckless and needs the watchful eye of Rusty, who acts like a sounding board to Bossy. It is through his conversations with Rusty, that Bossy puts together an elaborate plan, thought out with clarity. Together, their friendship is productive and ultimately helps them reinstate themselves in Tawny's court by eliminating Lively from the master's beneficence. On the other hand, the friendship between Lively and Tawny, is based on the condition of perception of mutual trust which underscores their symbiosis. Their friendship is unnatural as it is against the natural call of predator

versus prey. Once the perception of trust is reversed and modified by the willful orchestrations of the jackals, who manage to reinstate the perception of the predator and prey as categories that are essentially adversarial in nature, the unnaturalness of their friendship easily weakens the temporary and conditional bond between Lively and Tawny.

Interestingly, this section examines service as friendship. It is also a warning to the princes regarding how servitude may be looked upon as a "mark of shame" (Haskar 88) by disgruntled, ambitious and conspiring servants like Bossy. Thus, on the one hand, friendship is natural, economical and necessary for survival. It is underscored within the economizing conditions of nature which creates categories such as predator and prey based on historical/hereditary and time-tested ethical, essential, cultural and psychological factors. On the other hand, friendships are also fluid, conditional, temporary, situational and contingent on the circumstances. They may not lie eternally in or against the interests of individuals but may be formed and split by the orchestrations of outside interests, who ultimately co-exist within the world as one, but the world also as a zero-sum game. The last two sections, namely *Vigraha* or war and *Sandhi* or peace discuss the lessons learnt from war and peace, respectively. Within each of these situations, it is one's friends that determine the kingdom's destiny. Both the sections are based on the quest for supremacy and control between the swan, Hiranyagarbha or Golden egg and the peacock, Citravarna or Dapple. Golden egg is the ruler of the lake called Padmakeli and its adjoining island called Karpura. The peacock, Citravarna or Dapple is the King of the Vindhya hill at Jambu island. A crane named Dirghamukha, or Bigmouth arrives at Dapple's kingdom and enrages the birds there with his insinuations. Clearly, he is naïve, querulous and verbose. Bigmouth narrates the story of "The birds who tried to help the Monkeys" (Haskar 139), suggesting that when friendly and sound counsel falls on unreceptive and irate ears, it is the counsellor—in this case, alluding to himself—who suffers. This is only a prelude to the exchange of stories within a larger war of words between the birds of Vindhya and Bigmouth. Ultimately, he instigates a war between the two kingdoms. Bigmouth is asked to return to Karpura and make an announcement of war to his King. The parrot, a member of Dapple's retinue, refuses to

accompany him, citing the stories of "The Swan and the Crow" (Haskar 146) and "The Crow and the Quail" (Haskar 147). In the first story, the swan is tricked by a villainous crow. He empties his bowels and flies away, while the swan continues to provide shade to the tired traveler with his wings. The traveler blames the swan and kills him instantly. In the second story, a crow tricks a cowherd by repeatedly eating his curds and flying away swiftly, leaving his companion, the slow-moving quail to bear the brunt of his misdeed and thus was killed. Both stories warn against evil-minded friends as company.

Alternatively, it is in testing times that good friends and their sound counsel hold a ruler in good stead. Sarvajanya or Knowall, the goose, is Goldegg's Prime Minister, while the vulture named Durdarsi or Farsighted, serves King Dapple as minister. On either side, deliberations on war strategy and statecraft are carried out and they are chaired by the kings and their respective ministers. The goose enumerates key areas for framing strategy: appointing a secret spy, never "to decide post-haste on war", war as not the preferred means to influence enemies, the real war hero being one who knows "the true power of the foe," "timely labour ... true valour ... steadfast courage" are important virtues once war is immanent and that "The obstacle most primary/ Is excitation of the mind" (Haskar 154, 155). On the goose's counsel, the stork is asked to prepare a fort around the lake. The goose also advises Goldegg against trusting a new visitor called Meghavarna, or Cloudcolour, the crow, expositing that, "When your kin becomes a foe,/All your secrets he does know" (Haskar 159). On the other side, the vulture advises his King on similar lines. He reflects that:

The fools who rashly choose to face
The enemy's force without due thought,
It is but his sword's embrace
That for certain they have got. (Haskar162)

Against his minister's advice, King Dapple is eager to wage war. The vulture responds by laying forth a detailed exposition on defence strategy while incorporating differences in terrain, conditions of war, the strength of the enemy based on one's friends, foes and "internal lack of trust" (167), the current preparedness of his (Dapple's) army

and the incentives given to his personnel. His strategy seeks to involve the use of different species of animals based on their individual adaptations, merits, strengths, capabilities, abilities and techniques. At one point, when King Dapple is anxious about losing the war, it is the sagacious and seasoned vulture whose "prudence joined to bravery" (Haskar 176), brings victory to his King. On the other hand, while the kings and their ministers are engaged in personal combat, the loyal and brave stork is martyred. He covers King Goldegg with his own body and is thus killed by the blows from King Dapple's rooster's beak and claws. Thus, the stork has rendered unflinching friendly service to his King in accordance with the ideal of *kshatradharma*. In the fourth and final section of the *Hitopadesa*, *Sandhi* or Peace, the vulture, a loyal and friendly servant of his King, insists on peace and thoughtful action. He does not vacuously please his King by fanning the latter's desire for unmitigated action in the name of *kshatriyadharma*. Instead, he calls for a realistic appraisal of the situation. He assesses that King Goldegg is virtuous and strong and, therefore, a better collaborator and ally than a long-term foe. Thus, in both *Vigraha* and *Sandhi*, war becomes the testing ground of friendship. Words of counsel must pass between friends. Friendship is concretized in good counsel. Alternatively, good counsel is precious and therefore only meant for friends, who, in turn, guarantee its friendly reception.

To conclude, in his preface to the First Edition of the translation of the *Hitopadesa*, M. R. Kale, quotes the Indologist Sir William Jones, who suggests that the original title *Hitopadesa*, "the most beautiful, if not the most ancient" variously translated across different regions of the world, may be glossed over as "Amiable Instruction" (Jones qtd. in Kale iii). Kale also quotes Prof. H. Morley, from his introduction to Wilkins' translation of the *Hitopadesa*, who reckons a cultural imperialist "allowance" across a less progressive civilization. Morley suggests that "the local accidents of form" be ignored or expunged and he speculates that "every fable in the *Hitopadesa* can still be applied to human character ... (and) might find its time for being quoted now in Church, at home or upon "Change"" (Morley qtd. in Kale iii-iv). These glorious moral reckonings are, as we read them today, oversimplifications at best, for it is in the *Hitopadesa*'s genealogical journey, in and through the

contextual reading of the *Hitopadesa* along with its ideological and cultural assumptions, influences, debates and borrowings across ancient Hindu culture and philosophy, that the text may, in fact, be adequately (re)read. As the current paper shows, friendship and friendly relations are concepts both necessary for survival and yet nebulous in nature. This is particularly cogent in the context of international relations and the cross-cultural exchange of ideas today, where friendship and friendly relations as themes, like in the historical readings of the *Hitopadesa* by historians and critics across the globe and across centuries, may be misrecognized within the slippery slope of either relativism or universalism, unless examined across those power differentials that situationally and critically locate texts like the *Hitopadesa* along with their thematic concerns as embedded within the genealogical frameworks and the cultural, social and religious context of the Indian subcontinent.

Works Cited:

- Basham, A. L. *History and Doctrines of the Ājīvikas: A Vanished Indian Religion*. Luzac, 1951.
- Gautam, Pradeep Kumar. *Dharma: The Moral Aspects of Statecraft*. Revista, 2019.
- Gautam, Pradeep Kumar. *The Nitisara by Karmandaka: Continuity and Change from Kautilya's Arthashastra*. Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis, 2019.
- Haksar, A. N. D, translator. *The Hitopadeśa*. By Nārāyaṇa, Penguin Books, 2006.
- Kāle, Moreshvar Ramchandra, ed. *The Hitopadeśa of Nārāyaṇa*. Motilal Banarsidass Publ., 1967.
- Mahadevan, T. M. P. "The Basis of Social, Ethical, and Spiritual Values in Indian Philosophy." *Essays in East-West Philosophy*, edited by Charles Alexander Moore, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1951, pp. 320.
- Malamod, Charles. "On the Rhetoric and Semantics of Purusartha." *Way of Life : King Householder Renouncer : Essays in Honour of Louis Dumont*, edited by Madan Triloki Nath, Motilal Banarsidass, 1988, pp. 33-54.
- Modh, Bhumika Mukesh. "International Humanitarian Law: An Ancient Indian Perspective." SSRN, 2011.
- Roy, Kaushik. *Hinduism and the Ethics of Warfare in South Asia: From Antiquity to the Present*. Cambridge UP, 2012.
- Sinha, Manoj Kumar. "Hinduism and International Humanitarian Law." *International Review of the Red Cross*, 2005, pp. 285-294.
- Warrier Krishna A.G. *Maha Upanisad*, Vol. VI. The Theosophical Society, 1953.



Notes on Human Epoch: Sudeep Sen's *Anthropocene*

Tom Phillips*

Abstract

This paper examines how underpinning concerns with the relationships between self, community and the world in Sen's work not only articulate a need for these relationships to be recalibrated in order to avoid descent into dystopia, but also connect into the volume's contemplation of the necessity, role and value of poetry (and, by extension, art in general) in such circumstances. The paper then examines, more specifically, how Sen discovers consolations that extend beyond consumerist distractions even in the midst of signs and portents of imminent cataclysm and these might relate to the notion of poetry itself offering companionship as articulated by the British writer John Berger in his response to Sen's work. The paper concludes by considering Anthropocene in the context of geopolitical change at the global level (specifically, the concept of re-globalisation following a surge in nationalism) and the possibility of the (re)emergence of a putative world poetry.

Keywords: Anthropocene, climate change, Covid-19, companionship, consolation, environment, existential threat, globalisation/re-globalisation, pandemic, poetry

As his 2015 volume of new and selected poems and translations, *Fractals*, demonstrates, Sudeep Sen's output over the last forty years as a poet and translator—not to mention as a literary editor, dramatist, photographer and editor too—has been prodigious and so it should perhaps not come as a surprise to find that his 2021 post-*Fractals* collection, *Anthropocene*, published during a time of pandemic and extreme weather events, should itself be remarkable, both in volume and scope. Its alliterative subtitle *Climate Change, Contagion, Consolation* alerts us to its topicality and the key recurrent themes which fall within the horizon of Sen's broad view of the Anthropocene, the human—perhaps, all-too-human—epoch that began in earnest during the Industrial Revolution or at a much earlier

* UK-born poet, translator and lecturer who now lives in Sofia, Bulgaria.

juncture. And yet, despite his acute observations of what he refers to in his prologue, “The Role of the Artist is Not to Look Away,” as “our world’s passage from utopia to dystopia,” the directly felt consequences of, on the one hand, humankind’s destructive impact on the natural world and, on the other, the Covid-19 pandemic are not the occasion for disheartened rumination, apocalyptic prescriptions or necessarily bleak conclusions (24). Sen also offers opportunities for consolation and, again in his words, *Anthropocene* “is ultimately a prayer for positivity and hope”(24). Or, to put it another way, using John Berger’s words to describe Sen’s poems: they “bring – like all true poetry—so much companionship.” It is this ability to look deeply into a seemingly merciless present and towards an even more apparently merciless future whilst, at the same time, seeking occasions for a solace, that goes beyond, goes deeper than the mere numbing of anxiety through the distractions of consumerism and its attendant medications which sits at the core of this particular volume of Sen’s work more generally and, perhaps, as Berget says, of all true poetry too. Here, then, I focus on the work in *Anthropocene* and discuss Sen’s diagnosis of the state we are in, where he seeks solace and how his poetry itself offers us consolation through, amongst other things, Berger’s notion of poetry as companionship.

A Topical Storm

It would be easy but simplistic to regard the work in *Anthropocene* as poetry in the form of reportage and outrage, an immediate, urgent response to pressing concerns, news that stays news after it’s been articulated, and as a demonstration of a more openly *engagé* approach than is apparent in his earlier work—in which, with a kind of tireless restlessness and detailed attentiveness, Sen brings his own perspectives to bear on lyrical tropes of nature, art and love. The sense of urgency in the *Anthropocene* poems—some brief as haiku, others relatively lengthy prose reflections—is certainly founded in what might be called topical documentary observation and is undoubtedly a felt presence—both in stark titles like “Global Warming,” “Rising Sea Levels,” “Climate Change,” and in the scrupulous detail that occasions and amasses in individual poems, whether that be a *neem*’s “serrated leaves” that “wear season’s toxicity / on their exposed skin” in “Pollution” (34) or the “fragmented waves of golden-amber spark / electrifying helical fire-

flurries” (118) in “Burning Ghats, Varanasi”, lines that are reiterated beneath one of images in the evocative sequence of photographs and poetry, “Skyscapes” (105) included in the mid-section of the collection. The unexpected beauties of nature and the equally unexpected—and not always quite so beautiful—the behaviour of humans during the pandemic are shadowed by an unavoidably ominous tone. It is almost as if we have forgotten how to live, both with our planet and with each other, Sen suggests, pointing towards the accumulating symptoms of existential crisis.

In “Concrete Graves,” for example, Sen writes of “Arrogance, avarice, / real seduction”, “blighted brick buildings // spurring breath- wheeze” and “Skeletal skyscrapers / unfinished flyovers” that “collapse prematurely / burying people” — all evidence that we are heading along “a fast-track to/our planet’s detonation” (41). Similarly, in “Obituary,” reprints of two New York Times’ front pages from during the pandemic indicate again these poems’ topicality and responsiveness to current events: “Our lives” reduce to “micro point-size fonts/on an ever-inflating pandemic list—/ black specks, fugitive lonely numbers—/ the deceased, on an official roster” (53). Or again in ‘Speaking in Silence’ where Sen gets to the heart of this perfect storm of disturbances in the natural world, viral contagion and unjust and irresponsible capitalism in a single couplet:

As the world pandemically wrestles with the dry
heat
of disease and pestilence — profiteers pry, pilfer.
(57)

The element of reportage looms large too in a sequence of prose poems titled simply ‘Newsreel’ as well as in the fourteen ‘Corona Haiku’, snapshots of “our ‘new normal’ where “pestilence prevails” that hinge on the question of whether we will find “a more compassionate world/ after this pandemic’s death”, but end with images that suggest that we will not:

Hunger
migrants chew dry leaves
off the streets—no food, water—

national disgrace

*

Migrants

walking the highways
hopelessly, towards fractured
dreams, awaiting death (62)

This is not to say by any means that Sen has not engaged with contemporary realities and their political implications before, far from it — but what perhaps previously formed an undercurrent, sensed by the reader, but not necessarily explicit, has emerged onto the surface in the form of more direct language, more overt expressions of unease. Sen is not the only poet, of course, whose recent work reflects this shift towards urgency or manifests a similar desire and need to record, document, articulate lived experiences that derive from and illuminate the patterns of chaos, conflict and threat that now appear to sweep across the globe with disturbing frequency and in an equally disturbing variety of configurations (I am writing this nearly a year into the Russian invasion of Ukraine). Increasingly, poets in all parts of the world are addressing the cumulative effects and consequences of human behaviour, on the natural environment, for the world at large and the specific individuals who inhabit it. To call this a trend is to risk belittling it, as if it were merely a convenient fad, a bandwagon to leap on, but while there may perhaps be some who are spurred by a desire to be seen to be ‘on message’ or, to put it more generously, by a feeling that these are topics they *ought* to write about from specific standpoints or perspectives, there are many others who, like Sen, are producing work that directly engages with the topical at the local, national and international levels without resorting to bolted-together platitudes and slogans. Yes, in one sense, it is political poetry, in that they openly deal with key political issues, but, crucially, it is also poetry that is deeply rooted in the personal, in the impacts and pressures that make themselves felt on us whoever and wherever we happen to be.

In his prose piece “Poetics of Solitude, Songs of Silence,” in which he reflects not only on the isolation of lockdown (which, as he notes, is “nothing new” for a writer), but also on the relationship

between solitude, thought and creativity, Sen writes: “Wherever I am, I’m always at once at ‘home’ and in the ‘world’.” It is a sense of simultaneity that he suggests may derive “from a sense of rootedness” and exists within “a precious zone for philosophical thinking, a space for silence and ‘stillness’ (as Pico Iyer says) that allows an inner voice to be heard” (160). It is also — it seems to me at least—at the heart of Sen’s engagement with the global-topical themes that course through *Anthropocene* and yet remain deeply rooted in the personal and the everyday. The poems, in other words, originate, not in pungent rhetoric, broad-stroke opinion (although Sen is not afraid to voice his opinion as the phrase ‘national disgrace’ in the ‘Hunger’ haiku evidence) or in what has become conventional apocalyptic imagery (although again Sen is not afraid to deploy words like ‘pestilence’ and ‘plague’ when they earn their place), but in the close observation and re-examination of seemingly insignificant, often familiar details: those ‘serrated leaves’ on the *neem* tree outside Sen’s study, the cloudscape that recur in infinite variety throughout the collection or, as in the opening stanzas of “Scar”, the entirely ordinary event of a lightbulb blowing out:

The heating filament snaps –
orange-white death –
electric rage.

Winters in Delhi, unpredictable
like its power supply —
adulterous, unreliable, fickle as weather. (135)

Orientations

One question that the twin crises of climate change and the coronavirus pandemic — especially during those long periods of lockdown — has brought into focus is the relationship between ‘I’, ‘home’ and ‘the world’ that Sen refers to in “Poetics of Solitude, Songs of Silence.” The relationship between the personal, the communal and the global, which brings with it questions of identity, responsibilities, negotiation and obligation, has always been but is now becoming increasingly politicised. On the one hand, we have those who suggest that this relationship requires recalibration, that we have to make deep-seated changes to the ways in which we engage with the self, each other and the world, changes that will, if

not wholly prevent, then at least ameliorate the long-term damage of global warming, potential future global health crises and their attendant human and geo-political repercussions. On the other, there are those who vehemently and vociferously deny the need for any such recalibration or reappraisal and, at their most extreme, claim that both climate change and the coronavirus pandemic are ‘fake news’, a claim, behind which lie all manner of assumptions that support a dangerously anthropocentric stance towards the small blue dot that we inhabit. In between, of course, there also lies a vast range of other positions and orientations. What there is no denying, however, is that this issue has become—or is at least starting to become—one of the principal fault lines or network of fault lines in social tectonics at the individual, communal and geo-political levels. Families have become divided over differences in opinion about global warming or vaccination against Covid 19. Societies have rearranged themselves according to new allegiances that are founded in conventional divisions (class, race, gender, religion), but have been supplemented with or penetrated by other categories of difference that relate to degrees of scepticism and acceptance, trust in structures and systems and the multiple interpretations of concepts like ‘freedom’, ‘justice’ and ‘equality’ that are continually argued over. At the global level too, the geo-political order is undergoing realignment, a realignment which may yet prove to be as significant as that which followed the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the collapse of communism in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union and the adjustment of Cold War-era spheres of occupation, interference and influence—a realignment whose outlines have come into view more firmly since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. These are, of course, issues of major importance with almost inconceivable consequences if the tectonic shifts they presage occur. Such shifts may well prove not only systemic, but existential, heralding the beginning of an epochal transition from the Anthropocene to the post-Anthropocene. That transition may not necessarily result in the extinction of the human species (although that is one possibility), but it might result in an as yet almost unforeseeable repositioning of our species within whatever is left of the global ecosystem such that we are no longer able to exert the dominance over other species and over nature as a whole that many seem to believe is a right granted to us by the accident of our having conscious minds. At present, what that repositioning might look like

remains the stuff of dystopian imagination—bands of nomads roaming the few remaining inhabitable regions of the planet, perhaps, or isolated remnant communities strung out across the archipelagos of what was once high land and is now all that survives above rising oceans or maybe even a small surviving extra-terrestrial colony on the Moon or Mars with a derelict planet left behind. For the moment, the precise nature of the post-Anthropocene is not important. What is important—if not wholly crucial—is that the tectonic shifts that may well lead to it are already becoming visible.

Given the existential nature of the threats posed by current approaches to the relationships between ‘I’, ‘home’ (taken as meaning our place of residence, everyday mode of living and the immediate community into which we are connected) and ‘the world’ in the broader sense, no matter whether those approaches reflect what we have become habituated to thinking of as conventional left-wing, centrist-liberal or right-wing ideology, whether they seem to offer hope, indifference or despair, it may seem that poetry—especially essentially lyric poetry—has little to offer. As Auden infamously said in “In Memory of W.B. Yeats”, “Poetry makes nothing happen” and survives as an inconsequential gesture (“A way of happening”) or the articulation of opinion (“A mouth”). Even in the face of potential cataclysm (such as the Second World War, whose beginning was fast approaching when Auden wrote his elegy for Yeats), poets have every right to make such gestures and voice such opinions, but, ultimately, they cannot and should not expect their gestures and opinions to *do* anything, to make anything *happen*. Or that at least seems to be the implication. Thus, while poets have every right to offer perspectives, voice opinions, and exercise their right to free speech by writing about what they please (who else is in any position to determine what poets can and cannot write about?), including pressing political issues, paradoxes remain. Is there any point in doing so? Is such poetry merely ‘preaching to the converted’? Is it merely a form of political gesture or gestural politics? Or, worse, might it be construed as an assertion of poetic authority and exceptionalism, the construction of an authoritative lyric ‘I’ based on the traditional humanist assumption that displays of rhetorical and linguistic dexterity confer a status on an ‘I’ that allows it to speak to and for us? To put it crudely, why should anyone listen to a poet on

questions that seem to require, again, no matter what your own opinions about what the results should be, making something happen? “You write about these things, poet. But why aren’t you out on the streets? Why don’t you actually *do* something?”

In some cases, of course, the poets *are* out on the streets, but even those who don’t engage in overt activism are engaged in an activity which, I would argue, necessarily concerns itself with those relationships between ‘I’, ‘home’ and ‘the world’ that are profoundly, fundamentally linked to the fault lines that are emerging and becoming increasingly concerning because they seem to presage the tectonic shifts which, in their turn, might bring about the conditions for the arrival of the post-Anthropocene. What Sudeep Sen describes in “Poetics of Solitude, Songs of Silence,” in other words, extends beyond his own personal sense of simultaneity between ‘home’ and ‘world’ to all poetry: unless it is specifically written for self-consumption alone (that is, as self-expression for its own sake, as a form of catharsis or therapy), poetry necessarily entails—no matter what its subject, style, perspective, voice etc—an awareness of the self and its position *in* the world. Or perhaps more speculatively, all poetry is part of the process of constructing a home for the self in the world. That it does so quietly, making “amid all the clamour of public rhetoric and widespread distress ... a quiet artistic offering”, as Sen puts it, is what makes it all the more valuable. It is perhaps no accident that the word ‘silence’ appears more than thirty times in *Anthropocene*, celebrated on the one hand as a respite from “all the clamour” and, on the other, as a source, the companion of a stillness that allows “an inner voice to be heard”. On reading *Anthropocene*, it seems all the clearer to me that this silence and stillness are prerequisites, necessary pre-conditions for writing, for articulating whatever requires articulating, and consequently make possible precisely the kind of recalibration in our relationship to the immediate and then wider world that I have been talking about. To write a poem, in other words, inevitably involves reflection, even if it is not articulated in the poem itself, on the self (who is ‘speaking’ in the poem?), home (language itself is a kind of home) and the world (to whom and for whom is a poem speaking?)—reflection that leads to an adjustment, no matter how seemingly insignificant, in a writer’s relationships to self, home and world, and that occurs in the silence

and stillness preceding utterance—and in the silence and stillness that follows utterance in many cases too, I suspect.

The British poet R.F. Langley (1938-2011) was another writer with an acute sense of the value of silence and stillness both as a means to achieve a recalibration with the world and as a condition for the activity of poetry. They were his way of getting through “to what was really there”, as he put it in an interview published in *Don’t Start Me Talking*, a collection of interviews with writers published by Salt in 2006, and according to his own account, he would spend hours standing in absolute stillness, a habit borne witness to by his fellow poet Jeremy Prynne who noted during Langley’s memorial service in 2011:

His alertness to perception was enhanced by a studied practice of taking up an immobile, silent stance, either inside a building or upon some grassy bank outside, to open his gaze and thoughts over an extended period, mind busy with interior responses or purposefully blank, to tune in to his surroundings. (239)

Tellingly, Prynne also described this mode of being as “a kind of mental and indeed moral photography” (Langley, xii)— and this very much seems to cohere with Sudeep Sen’s description cited above of finding or establishing “a space for silence and ‘stillness’ [...] that allows an inner voice to be heard”. As I have argued above, this space is not an escape *from* the world, but a space to recalibrate our relationships with it in ways which, as Sen’s work illustrates, have acquired not only moral but political, systemic and existential dimensions.

Consolations

Sen’s poem titled “Consolation” begins with a simple observation, albeit one hinging on an ambiguity in the word ‘gleam’ as potentially both noun and verb, a small but significant indicator that we should not take everything *as read*:

Wet rose petals, velvety,
gleam, tealight’s soft glow.

Light is a recurrent motif in Sen's poetry, as is colour, for that matter, both of those motifs almost certainly derive from his interest in and practice of photography but also open up fields of enquiry, inviting us to consider what light actually illuminates, what associations colours might have acquired for us. Here light plays across a domestic scene where "Feather-fire radiates/early seasonal warmth//adding grain-texture/to counter-top's varnish" and in the garden there are "night candles, fairy lights / on trained greens". There is, we sense, both silence and stillness, a concomitant warmth of home, preludes to what Sen calls "raw/solemnity, soon to follow". This is provided by "a young Sufi singer" whose song assumes

a gentle
rising form, its timbre deepening,

measured lyrics unfolding
note by note, its phrasing

raw, simple, secular,
spiritual — a deep sonar

healing — its soul sombre,
magical, meditative. (152-3)

The poem bears the title "Consolation" perhaps because it might serve as a quintessence or at least emblem of the discovered consolations that Sen writes of elsewhere in the "Consolation: Hope" section of *Anthropocene*: resurgent plant life, the light of all kinds and its diverse effects, coming warmth, silence and stillness transformed into art (in both the young sufi singer's song and the poem itself). As the collection progresses away from its early strident chords, its themes of climate change and pandemic, the personal pain and fever recounted in the prose poems that make up a section called "Corona Red", its song too might be said to acquire "a gentle rising/form, its timbre deepening" and, above all, "a deep sonar healing". We are reminded that poetry not only has the capacity to articulate the traumas that humanity is inflicting on the natural world and itself but that it also has a reparative capability. It is, in that evocative title of Jeremy Prynne's 1974 pamphlet, *Wound Response*,

but it is also a response that can both remind us of the wound and point us towards strategies of healing. Sen's acute observations of the natural world are in themselves, in their acuteness, contributory: like Langley's, they arise from silence and stillness, whether they are occasioned by the *neem* tree outside his study (reborn in "Neem: Delhi Summer" as its "Bare brown branches yearn//wait for an errant raindrop to spark sex" (143) after being subjected to the "season's toxicity" in "Pollution"), the cloudscares and skyscapes over Delhi, the "metaphor spark, jagged lightning" of a meteor (149) or "the aural orchestra" of the stars with their "distant / pan-flute crackles echoing anti-gravity static, / space-dust murmurations, galactic-sighs, crests-troughs" (150). Sen chooses a quotation from William Blake's 'Auguries of Innocence' ("To see a World in a Grain of Sand/And a Heaven in a Wild Flower/Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand/And Eternity in an hour") as one of the epigraphs for the "Consolation: Hope" section of *Anthropocene* seems wholly appropriate. The collection might be read as a modern-day *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, albeit in reverse order and without such a sharp division between those two categories. Even in the poems, we might categorise as songs of experience in the first half of the book, there are moments of modest celebration and the consoling innocence of the poems later on are still tempered by experience, the knowledge of what's amiss, what's still potentially disturbing the sombre or raw or joyous equilibrium.

Coming earlier than the "Consolation: Hope" section, the bridge between the two is the sequence of photographs and short excerpts from other poems that serve as subtitles for the images reprinted in "Skyscapes." The excerpts look both back and forward to poems elsewhere in the collection and the vivid, sometimes almost surreally vivid photographs might be sensed as either ominous or reparative: are these extraordinary skyscapes manifestations of nature's beauty or portents of imminent disaster? Could their "terrible beauty" (Sen quotes Yeats' phrase three times in *Anthropocene*) itself be a portent of coming catastrophe? From here, the poems become more concerned with consolation, become more consolatory. In the "Holocene: Geographies" section, the poems begin to find what Sen calls in "Abandoned Gods" "a temporary finery" and experiences when "at least the moment is living" (124). They may be fleeting and

transient, but at least they are alive, not already subsumed into the wounds and anxieties striating earlier poems. There are human compensations too, in the form of friendship (most notably in “Witherstone”), art and—love, most poignantly expressed because brought up against the consequences of the anthropocentric threat in 'Aspen':

Forest fires conflagrate,
but cannot raze

the incandescent love
for my beloved. (139)

Companionship

Not so long ago, in a creative writing class at Sofia University St Kliment Ohridski in Bulgaria where I teach, I asked my students why they repeatedly used the word ‘relatable’ to describe and designate a text successful and why they thought relatability might be a criterion for assessing whether a text works or not. They came up with some convincing answers, but these seemed rather more connected with readability and comprehensibility than with what poetry and literature in general might be capable of doing. Or of at least attempting to do. At the time, it seemed as if they wanted literature to be something they could rely on, like a good friend. Something that would reflect back on their own experiences and tell them that everything was going to be OK. That it was, essentially, a mirror—not of the world they lived in, but of their opinions about it. I have to admit that I'm not sure how's literature works. Shakespeare famously had Hamlet talking about putting a mirror up to nature but then showed us many things which are not—to be honest—immediately 'relatable'—likewise, Keats, Baudelaire, Eliot, Plath and on and on. My counterargument was that maybe it's good sometimes to encounter work that manages to be both partially relatable and partially unrelatable. Isn't that how art works? By making the familiar unfamiliar but yet introducing an element of the familiar into the unfamiliar? How relatable, for example, is *The Waste Land*? Or *Finnegans Wake*? Or *The Castle*? Or *The Naked Lunch*? Isn't great literature often great because it's entirely unrelatable and offers us the opportunity to look at our own experiences in a wholly new way? It might start with the relatable, but then lead us with varying degrees

of gentleness or harshness towards the unrelatable because previously unthinkable.

A few weeks later, I probably still hold to that thought. However, re-reading *Anthropocene* in the light of that discussion and of John Berger's comment on Sen's work that suggests all true poetry offers companionship has afforded an opportunity to think again, not only about poetry's liminal status as a way of happening that yet makes nothing happen but also about why we read it, about what it offers us. Does a poet – another individual whose circumstances and life are very different to ours—finding consolation mean that we can find consolation in that too? Berger's phrase returns. His choice of companionship—rather than friendship or relatability—was no doubt intended to be precise. A companion is not the same as a friend, an acquaintance or a relation—or someone we necessarily directly relate to. It is a presence, sometimes someone well known, sometimes someone who is a total stranger. Companionship is a category of relationship, of interaction that might encompass what we feel when we share a railway compartment with someone who happens to be travelling in the same direction but has no other connection with us. Such a companion maybe someone who, in the intimate unfamiliarity of a chance encounter, is granted or grants themselves a certain licence. A licence to articulate thoughts and emotions that they might not otherwise be comfortable articulating, untested, in other companies. Not simply to speak or share but also to both challenge and console. Companionship, in other words, may well be a comfort, but it is not always necessarily comfortable. And it is in this that Berger's identification of companionship with "all true poetry" is in itself precisely true. Poetry, like all art forms, is work, a form of work, and, contrary to Auden's assertion that it "makes nothing happen", it has work to do even if its consequences are not immediately perceptible. And part of that work is to be a companion, not the instantly relatable companion who flings an arm around you and assures you that all is well, the boon companion of various polished tales, but the stranger in the railway carriage who might, let's say, point at the arrangement of clouds on the horizon and see in it a yearning for rain, a yearning for reparation. Or who rages against the dying of this or that light but also encourages you to look again at the serrated leaves of a *neem* tree or how shadows play across a garden

as someone begins to sing. Or who offers, in place of rhetorical political clamour, considered reflections born of moments of stillness and silence, reflections that are, like the young Sufi singer's song, simultaneously secular and spiritual.

Re-Globalisation: A Conclusion

In the 1990s and 2000s, following the crumbling away of the Cold War geo-political order (which was nowhere near as abrupt or as extensive as many interpretations claim), the word 'globalisation' became talismanic. Globalisation was what the post-Cold War geo-political order, supplemented by the internet and digitalisation, would enable, and with that would come—we were told—a new stage in the Anthropocene. A floriation of equality and freedom that would replace the rigid structures imposed by imperialist structures and nation-state aspirations. What we now know—and probably knew at the time but did our best to avoid knowing—was never going to happen. The so-say globalised world operates along different fault lines, but it nevertheless replicates divisions between 'us' and 'them' that have characterised so-say civilisation since the ancient Greeks defined themselves in opposition to the barbarians. It has also exacerbated the damage we are doing to our planet and ourselves by supporting unsustainable economic practices such as sending endless shipments of goods manufactured by underpaid workers in one country to overpaid consumers in another country halfway across the globe, whilst at the same time encouraging an airy indifference to that damage via a pragmatic perception of individuality built on that old British cliché "I'm all right, Jack" and a phlegmatic optimism founded in the assumption that "it might all look like chaos now, but it will turn out fine in the end".

As it turns out, of course, this concept of globalisation has sent us back, scurrying into our silos—a process accelerated in a very real sense by the Covid-19 pandemic—and has ushered in a passive-aggressive right-wing populism that takes succour from the traumas and anxieties that globalisation has spawned and appears not to care about the consequences of its desire to provide quick fixes for perceived individual and social disparities in—let's be honest—the name of profit. It is the kind of populism that allows the tyrannies imposed by imperialist governments to be replaced by the tyrannies

imposed by multinational companies with, as it were, compliant politicians, nodding along to the tune. What we need, perhaps, is a reinvention of globalisation. A re-globalisation, as it were. A re-globalisation that's embedded not in profit margins and trade deficits but in what we actually have in common with both ourselves and the environment we live in. It would be entirely naïve, possibly foolish, to claim that a reinvigorated notion of 'world poetry' might achieve or even be a contributing factor to the achievement of that, but that seems to be what collections like *Anthropocene* are starting to make possible. Heterogenous, but also rooted in specificities, it is undoubtedly of and for this world, alert to shared experiences, wired into the poetry that has preceded it, addressing that terrible beauty that humankind seems capable of creating in multiple forms and circumstances. Sen's is poetry which is open to both outrage and solace. For all its anger, it is deeply rooted in the appreciation of the unavoidable locality of where we each live, where we each form our attachments, where we each form friendships and love, and we need to accommodate ourselves to that, its similarities and differences. Above all, perhaps, it is capable of that "terrible beauty" that Yeats spoke of, exemplified here in "Aspen", the poem mentioned above that operates on all manner of levels, but crucially leaves us, the reader, the other, space to respond and find a shared consolation in our shared experience:

ASPEN
for Simi

Gold-orange patina
imprinted serrated leaves

glow silk — incarnadine
like russet sunsets.

Foliage slow-shivers —
every breath, heaving.

Winter-white barks
studiously slow-burn.

Forest fires conflagrate,
but cannot raze

the incandescent love
for my beloved.

*

Wave after wave,
the Northern lights'

luminously pirouette
in polar-cooled wind

chill — redolent colours
sculpting translucent

letters in this frozen air —
a sacrament of faith,

brightly lit. Decoding
hieroglyph's lost
lyrics — an exquisitely
sung ghazal unfolds.
Glava, Sweden (139-140)

Endnote

All page references, unless otherwise stated, are to: Sudeep Sen,
Anthropocene: Climate Change, Contagion, Consolation.

Works Cited

- Langley, R.F. "R.F. Langley". *Don't Start Me Talking*, edited by Tim Allen
and Andrew Duncan, Salt Publishing, 2007.
Sen, Sudeep. *Anthropocene: Climate Change, Contagion, Consolation*.
Pippa Rann Books & Media, 2021.



‘The Creature’ of Modern Frankenstein: An Exploration of Representation of Plastic Consciousness in Children’s Literature

Sumneet Kaur*, Chitwan**

Abstract

Amongst many, a major cause of “ecological wounding” is the presence of plastic in our environment which take over decades or sometimes even centuries to decompose into simpler constituents. This paper evaluates the representation of plastic and the inculcation of plastic consciousness and the spreading of ecological sensitivity through them. By bringing literature and plastic on an equal pedestal, the perusal seeks to answer, among others, the question: How is plastic represented in children's literature? Why has the concept of the disadvantages of plastic become a part of children’s literature? Is children’s literature concerning degradation due to plastic spreading critical thinking about our environment and igniting environmental sensitivity or plastic consciousness?

Keywords: plastic, children's literature, environment, ecology, debris

Introduction

The loss of biodiversity and animal extinction, deforestation and persistent degradation of wetland and dryland ecosystems, fluctuations in the distribution of rainfall/snowfall, magnification of greenhouse effects, and acid rain etc., are increasing day by day due to and lack of healthy interaction between the biotic and the abiotic resources around us. Along with some ecological issues like avalanches, tidal waves, tsunamis, hurricanes, wildfires, landslides, earthquakes, and manmade activities are adversely affecting the environment. Amongst many, a major cause of “ecological wounding” is the presence of plastic and plastic products in our

* Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar.

** Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Guru Nanak Dev University

environment which take over decades or sometimes even centuries to decompose into simpler constituents because of lack of ultraviolet light that assists them in breaking down and also because they can fight microbial degradation (Ghosh 285). Plastic has become a permanent tenant of our atmosphere, landscapes, waterscapes and food chain, so much so that “from plastic bottles to plastic money, we are (en)plasticised: have plastic trees, plastic birds, plastic soil, plastic water, plastic stomachs, and a plastic planet” (Ghosh 277). It poses biosecurity threats by transferring diseases into the wider environment. The presence of the eternal plastic debris in “the remotest corners of the planet ... metaphorically understood, [even] in uninhabitable islands” has necessitated the policymakers, organisations, manufacturers, consumers and the common man to take action to improve the management of plastic waste and to reduce the effects on the environment (Ghosh 280). As a result, plastic consciousness has found representation in children's literature in the last two to three decades.

Since a relationship exists “between literature and the physical environment ... [or] interconnections [exist] between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artefacts of language and literature” (Glotfelty xix), the aim of the paper is to critically examine selected children's books from eco-critical stance. The paper evaluates the representation of plastic and the inculcation of plastic consciousness and the spreading of ecological sensitivity through them. The present study ventures into this direction with a host of texts like *A Planet Full of Plastic: And How You Can Help* by Neal Layton, *Pesky Plastic: An Environmental Story* by Leticia Colon De Mejias, *Harry Saves the Ocean!* by N.G.K. and Sylva Fae, and *One Plastic Bag: Isatou Ceesay and the Recycling Women of the Gambia* by Miranda Paul. By bringing literature and plastic on an equal pedestal, the perusal seeks to answer questions like: Who is Modern Frankenstein and what did he create? Did he notice the horrific side of his ‘creature’ too late? How has this ‘creature – the plastic’ been degrading the environment of his master? Does Modern Frankenstein repent like Shelley's Victor Frankenstein? What is Modern Frankenstein doing to correct his mistake? Why has the concept of disadvantages of plastic become a part of children's

literature? How is plastic represented in children's literature? Is children's literature, concerning degradation due to plastic, spreading critical thinking about our environment and igniting environmental sensitivity or plastic consciousness? Does this sensitivity include exposure, exploration and appreciation of the surroundings in children? Is the literature captivating, reliable, with a compelling story that the children may relate to? What measures do the children take as a result of their education in this particular field?

Methodology

The present perusal scrutinises the pervasiveness of plastic and its adverse effects from a tripartite approach. First, it attempts to probe the invention of plastic as the creation of Modern Frankenstein. Comparing the stances of both Victor Frankenstein and Modern Frankenstein, it maps the excitement, ambition, disillusion, repulsion, remorse and amendments of both the creators for their respective creations. Secondly, the paper studies the representation of plastic in selected children's books from an eco-critical lens. Here, it seeks to determine how plastic consciousness and ecological sensitivity can be encouraged in children who are the future of the world. Finally, in order to testify to the efficacy of the instructive-cum-entertaining narratives from selected works on young impressionable minds, the medium of a questionnaire has been employed. The survey was conducted on a group of 100 children variably between the ages of 5-10 years. The tripartite approach adopted here helps to establish a collision between literature and plastic and premises upon Ranjan Ghosh's views on plastic.

Modern Frankenstein's Creature: 'The Plastic'

This part of the present paper caters to the first five questions listed to be explored. Mary Shelley's character Victor Frankenstein belongs to the most distinguished family of "counsellors and syndics" of Geneva and devours natural philosophy and chemistry at the University of Ingolstadt (Shelley 21). He is so "smitten with the thirst for knowledge" that he confesses

neither the structure of languages, nor the code of governments, nor the politics of various states possessed an attraction for me. It was the secrets of heaven and earth that I desired to learn, and whether it was the outward substance of things or the inner spirit of nature and the mysterious soul of man that occupied me, still my inquiries were directed to the metaphysical or in its highest sense, the physical secrets of the world.... But what glory would attend the discovery if I could banish disease from the human frame and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death! (Shelley 27, 28).

For this reason, Victor devotes himself “particularly to those branches of natural philosophy which relate to physiology [and] After days and nights of incredible labour and fatigue, [he] succeeded in discovering the cause of generation and life; nay, more, [he] became capable of bestowing animation upon lifeless matter,” and creates ‘the creature’ (Shelley 43, 44). Modern Frankenstein is the modern man – an inhabitant of “labour intensive, garbological, and fast-capitalist system” forced to share “plasticcitizenship” (Ghosh 278, 287). Contemplating upon beneficial properties of plastic, like extreme versatility, ability to be tailored to meet specific technical needs, lighter weight than competing materials, durability and longevity, resistance to chemicals, excellent thermal and electrical insulation properties, and far superior aesthetic appeal, Modern Frankenstein used polymers to create the ‘new creature’ by “polymerisation [which] effectively produce[s] long chains of molecules made up of a large series of interconnected links” (Ghosh *The Plastic Turn* 67). It is the size or the “hugeness” of the molecules that “account[s] for plastic’s essential feature: its plasticity” (Freinkel 5). In 1907, Leo Baekeland named his invention as Bakelite—“the first fully synthetic polymer, made entirely of molecules that couldn’t be found in nature” (Freinkel 6). Wide varieties of plastics like polyethylene, nylon, acrylic and Styrofoam were made extensive use of during the Second World War for industrial and military needs and “that’s when plastics truly began infiltrating every pore of daily life; quietly entering our homes, our cars, our clothes, our playthings, our workplaces, even our bodies” (Freinkel 6). Talking about the

translocationality of plastic, Ghosh also says, “plastic seeps into salt, water, soil, animal and human bodies, media, and our psychosis in non-linear, non-hierarchical, fragmentary mobility and fluidity; this does not discriminate between its point of origin and eventual destination, race, ethnicities, discriminations of colour, religious affiliations, cultural heritage, and political schoolings” (278). Eric Fawcett and Reginald Gibson’s development of polyethylene in 1933 paved the way for stronger polyethylene to be designed later. With legends like Hermann Staudinger (1881–1965), Wallace Hume Carothers (1896–1937), Paul J. Flory (1910–1985), and Stephanie L. Kwolek (1923–2014), the field of polymer science and engineering witnessed advancement and expansion (Patterson 39, 40). Over 1.8 trillion pieces of plastic found in an area in the Pacific Ocean called the great pacific garbage patch, landfills like Apex Regional in Las Vegas, United States, Bordo Poniente in Mexico, Laogang in China, Malagrotto in Italy, Delhi Landfills in India, and Deonar in Mumbai, India could be compared to Victor Frankenstein’s creature.

But many times, the mightiest and most promising creation becomes the reason for its creator's disillusionment, depression and disappointment. Soon Shelley’s Victor Frankenstein undergoes a similar experience and he is repelled and appalled by the monstrosity of his creation. “The beauty of the dream vanished,” he becomes breathless and “horror and disgust filled [his] heart” (Shelley 50). He acknowledges, “Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room” (Shelley 50). With the passage of time, Modern Frankenstein also realised that his ‘creature’ was generating “a waste apocalypse, an irremediable fate of extinction through a gradual but certain course” (Ghosh 277). He comprehended that “plastic encroachment” of the environment has resulted in “bio-fouling and defouling” (Ghosh 278, 279). It has caused disruption, alteration and dilapidation of the original natural system resulting in exacerbated global warming and flooding, accumulation of plastic debris as sediment in water beds, acidification of aquatic environments, degrading health conditions and reproductive impairments. Agricultural/pastoral encroachment and expansion, increased usage of fertiliser, rising fuel wood collection, cultivation of cash crops, injurious fumes from use of

chemicals, toxic gases, industrial smoke in the atmosphere, excessive utilisation of groundwater aquifers, decomposers exhausting dissolved oxygen, landfills, disproportionate nitrogen deposition causing soil acidification, oil spills, and urbanisation due to overpopulation have resulted into degradation of the vegetation patch structure, the ground level water, the surface topographical features, and the human health and longevity. Like Victor Frankenstein, Modern Frankenstein grasped that many kinds of plastics do not fully degrade, dissolve or rust but get fragmented into little wreckages leaving impending 'eco-toxicological' impacts on the environment. Their incineration at extremely high temperatures results in releasing lethal fumes which cause cancers and birth defects. Less than a century-old creature, plastic has spread its roots in all aspects of human life by becoming a substitute for many materials like natural rubber, wood, iron, steel, ivory, horn, silk and cotton. Some properties of plastic encourage single or light-use which demands it to be discarded at rather a faster rate than production.

When Shelley's Victor finds out that his younger brother William has been murdered and Justine has been accused of the crime, he becomes distraught, traumatised, and guilt-ridden. He spies the monster lurking around the place where his brother's dead body had been found and becomes convinced that "the wretch, the filthy demon to whom [he] had given life," is responsible for William's brutal and miserable murder (Shelley 70). After pondering over the two years full of "scenes of evil and despair" that Victor has been trying to forget, he admits, "I had turned loose into the world a depraved wretch, whose delight was in carnage and misery; had he not murdered my brother?" (Shelley 71). Similarly, plastic has come to "stick to us in ways and means that are unfathomable, in scales that are often immeasurable, in moments that are, most often, unguarded," thus "creating a 'funeral pyre'" (Ghosh 286, 283). Modern Frankenstein has also understood that he "had cast among mankind, and endowed with the will and power to effect purposes of horror, such as the deed which he had now done, nearly in the light of [his] own vampire, [his] own spirit let loose from the grave, and forced to destroy all that was dear to [him]" (Shelley 71). He apprehends that his relationship with plastic is "a complicated

mix of dependence and distrust — akin to what an addict feels towards his or her substance of choice” (Freinkel 8). Initially Modern Frankenstein’s discovery or creature offered “wow-inducing possibility” but by 1967 with the release of the movie *The Graduate*, it had become “a bland, airless future, as phoney as Mrs Robinson’s smile,” which “stir[ed] such visceral disgust” that he has begun to hate it (Freinkel 5, 9). Freinkel quotes Norman Mailer who designates plastic as ““a malign force let loose in the universe ... the social equivalent of cancer”” (Freinkel 9). Modern Frankenstein is repenting that his monster – the plastic – can exist in diverse forms and conditions “as anthropogenic debris” (Ghosh 281). It has assumed enormous “stature ... with superhuman speed” exceeding “that of man,” “height [that] is superior,” “joints more supple” and a “figure hideously deformed and loathsome” (Shelly 95, 96, 119). As a result, in the present times Modern Frankenstein is consumed “with rage and horror,” to witness the “unearthly ugliness render[ing the monster of plastic] almost too horrible for human eyes” (Shelly 95). This “deep disenchantment” with “the miracle and menace of modern life” demands a “close ... in mortal combat” and an interminable assessment of the plastic economy and the absolute prohibition of plastic materials “to restore those victims whom [it has] so diabolically murdered!” (Freinkel 9; Shelly 95). “A train of reflection occurred” to both the Frankensteins “to consider the effects of what” they had done and what they are “now doing” (Shelley 169). They contemplate, “Had [they] right, for [their] benefit, to inflict this curse upon everlasting generations?” (Shelley 170). They have begun to shudder “to think that future ages might curse [them] as their pest, whose selfishness had not hesitated to buy its own peace at a price, perhaps, of the existence of the whole human race” (Shelley 170). Filled “with the bitterest remorse,” they have thought of ways to redeem themselves and achieve salvation (Shelley 169). Like Victor “tore to pieces” and destroyed “the [second] creature on whose future existence [the first one] depended for happiness”; Modern Frankenstein is also changing the ways to use and dispose of plastics in order to turn the plastic pollution problem around. (Shelly 170). He is reducing, reusing and recycling the plastics, taking away excess plastics from products where possible, recuperating energy from plastic waste

where applicable, and restructuring products to create more supportable substitutes because he has understood that

climate change, sustainability, and antitoxin movements make environmentalism a practice that entails grappling with how one's own bodily existence is ontologically entangled with the well-being of both local and quite distant places, peoples, animals, and ecosystems. Campaigns against plastic link not only coastal regions but also inland zones to the mushrooming plastic found in the oceans. (Alimao 131)

The Representation of Plastic Consciousness in Children's Literature

Another effort of Modern Frankenstein to create plastic consciousness among people is to educate them properly. To combat the issue of plastic pollution more effectively, the awareness programs can begin with the beginners in life, i.e. children. For that matter, what could be the more befitting medium of education than literature and the target readership than children who are the future? The urgent need for environmental sensitivity is purposely reflected in the children's literature. The current part addresses the set of the next five questions related to the representation of plastic in children's literature noted at the beginning of the paper. Aiming specifically at the young minds, the literature guides children in an instructive as well as entertaining manner to keep them engaged. It has the knack of projecting the most repulsive presence of trash and the quotidian existence of plastic in such an enthralling manner that children feel engrossed in the 'plastic-trash worlds' and they feel inadvertently drawn towards the environmental concerns. In order to inculcate plastic consciousness among children, it devises a host of values and ethical responsibilities in the young wards towards the surroundings so as to minimise disadvantages and collateral damage induced by plastic in the environment. Keeping in view the foregoing discussion, four books from children's literature have been selected. The first, *A Planet Full of Plastic: and how you can help* is a non-fiction written and illustrated by Neal Layton for the ones who love nature and want to help the environment. The next, *Pesky Plastic: An Environmental Story*, written by Leticia Colon De

Mejias and illustrated by Tamara Visco, is an amalgam of fiction and non-fiction as it simultaneously narrates three different stories while giving certain fast facts about plastic pollution. The third, *Harry Saves the Ocean!*, written by N.G.K. and Sylva Fae, and illustrated by Janelle Dimmett, is a fictitious narrative of a mouse that is confounded with the problem of plastic pollution in the sea and attempts to give a solution well-suited to its sensibilities. The final, *One Plastic Bag: Isatou Ceesay and the Recycling Women of the Gambia*, written by Miranda Paul and illustrated by Elizabeth Zunon, is based on the true events mapping the efforts of a handful of Gambian women in recycling the plastic mess into productive merchandise. A disparate selection of texts provides and later determines the holistic development of awareness in children through varied genres of writing and types of situations across both human and non-human worlds.

To begin with, the writers first try to catch the attention of the children by making them comfortable with plastic. To this end, Neal Layton in *A Planet Full of Plastic* devises a nameless boy as his listener to whom he narrates the 'plastic tale.' The boy supposedly is the reader of the book too (and by extension represents all the readers) as he is shown holding a copy of it. At the very outset, Layton addresses the nameless boy and purposely inquires: "Do you ever think about what things are made of?" (n.p.). Such a sudden question and conversational tone of the narrator not only makes the boy but the reader also inquisitive about the probable material. Without much ado, Layton announces, "... lots of things are made of something called plastic" and supports his statement with interesting illustrations showing diverse plastic objects (n.p.). Next, he appraises plastic as "FANTASTIC", which is found in all shapes, forms and colours, indicating the diversity in the material. It is deemed as a "super-useful" and "an incredible discovery" since many different things are made out of it (Layton n.p.). Here, Layton intentionally creates a 'plastic utopia – plastopia' (a term coined here). In this new age plastopia, plastic is found everywhere and dominates everything. In fact, plastic is celebrated for its diversity, strength, durability, flexibility, pervasiveness and attractiveness. Nevertheless, the conception of such 'plastopia' in children's minds generates a notion of plastic consciousness. This newly acquired

consciousness resonates with the children's understanding of the world around them, the world which is overwhelmed by plastic.

A similar approach has been adopted by Miranda Paul in *One Plastic Bag: Isatou Ceesay and the Recycling Women of the Gambia* where she introduces a plastic bag as something "silky ... flapping in the wind settl[ing] under a tree" which comes to Isatou's rescue just when her palm-leaf basket carrying fruits tips (n.p.). Drawing a contrast between the useless broken basket and the appealing plastic bag, the writer establishes how the naive girl finds the "strange fabric" useful enough to carry her load (Paul n.p.). After her first rendezvous with plastic, Isatou becomes conscious about the multi-utility of plastic which is used both by children (as they slurp *wanjo* from holes in clear plastic bags) and adults (as they carry things in bright blue and black plastic bags) in the rural area. Furthermore, plastic pervasiveness is manifested in the marketplace which displays "rainbows of plastic" enchanting everyone with its attractive hues (Paul n.p.). Interestingly, as Isatou breaks her bag walking by the marketplace, just then the next plastic bag floats by. The second plastic bag not only rescues the girl again from the discomfort but also signifies the ever-availability of the material which has become so convenient to procure in the 'plastopia.' However, as soon as the readers, the boy and the little girl in the two preceding texts, begin to revel in the 'plastopia' and marvel at the utilitarian force of plastic, the writers attempt to deconstruct the notion by enlisting the disadvantages of having plastic on earth. In doing so, they try to re-inscribe the plastic consciousness and encourage environmental sensitivity in young wards. Layton stresses the problem with plastic, which confounds the boy: "If you look around, you won't just see plastic where it is meant to be. You'll also see it where it's NOT meant to be" (n.p.). Then he supports his argument with images of plastic use (more of abuse) and plastic litter degrading the natural surroundings. Likewise, in *One Plastic Bag*, Isatou notices that the torn plastic bag which she had dropped once on her way has been joined by more. She confesses, "one plastic bag becomes two. Then ten. Then a hundred. Plastic isn't beautiful anymore" (Paul n.p.).

Similarly, in *Pesky Plastic*, Leticia Colon de Mejias warns the readers and the children about the accessibility and flexibility of plastic bags discarded by humans. They are easily blown around by the wind, eventually reaching rivers, trees and oceans. Arguably, human negligence and overindulgence in plastic create havoc on the natural surroundings. In this context, Rachel Carson reasons, "The most alarming of all man's assaults upon the environment is the contamination of air, earth, rivers, and sea with dangerous and even lethal material. This pollution is for the most part irrecoverable; the chain of events it initiates not only in the world that must support life but in living tissues is for the most part irreversible" (23). Such a 'dangerous' and 'lethal material' – plastic – eventually leads to "ecological wounding" of the natural resources, which is 'irrecoverable,' and; "biotic extinction" of different species, which is 'irreversible' (Ghosh 285, 278). The credit for such mushrooming of plastic and its good health goes to the "careless and flippant reject[ion]" of plastic utilities instead of a resilient one and, most importantly, to the non-biodegradable nature of plastic (Ghosh 285). Layton commendably narrates the story about plastic to educate the children and informs them how natural things can bio-degrade while plastic stays "for years and years" until the weather breaks it down into smaller pieces (n.p.). Eventually, it ends up in different places where it is not supposed to be. Even in *Harry Saves the Ocean!*, N.G.K. and Sylva Fae stress the non-perishable nature of plastic. They conceive an animal kingdom divided into terrestrial and aquatic parts. Harry, a mouse, goes to sea with his family for a stay. There he finds a whale stuck in a plastic bag. As the mouse helps the whale to get detangled from the plastic mess, the aquatic creature complains about how the plastic dumped into the sea does not perish away. It laments, "Your bags and your bottles, your bucket and spade...The trouble [is] with plastics, they don't biodegrade" (N.G.K. and Fae n.p.). In order to bring the idea home, the two writers, like Layton, draw the comparison of plastic with other perishable things.

Interestingly, the non-biodegradable property of plastic is related to another quality: translocationality. Since it does not rot easily, it keeps on travelling and "through an inexplicably complicated process reach[es] the sea" (Ghosh 284). Plastic may

float as “plastic litter” or sink as “plastic debris” but it stays there forever (Ghosh 281). Consequently, one may sympathise with the complaining whale in *Harry Saves the Ocean!* when it says, “the ocean is full of rubbish” and the aquatic life is grieved “thinking and dreaming of the home they once had” (N.G.K. and Fae n.p). Undoubtedly, the ocean is not pure and habitable anymore. Layton further shows concern about “the bits of plastic [that] have collected together, creating five enormous garbage patches full of plastic” in the oceans, with the most famous being North Pacific Garbage Patch (n.p.). The sea, in this sense, acquires a new meaning and becomes the “plastic sea” or the “hypersea—the gothic art of extraordinary objects coming together” (Ghosh 283, 288). No wonder the reconfiguration of sea—its appearance and properties—evoke the feelings of revolt, revulsion, nostalgia and helplessness in sea creatures who are subjected to the slow violence of plastic and lead a death-in-life kind of existence. The reality of plastic sea strikes hard: the creatures either get stuck in the plastic mesh (like the whale in *Harry Saves the Ocean!*) or are tempted to ingest plastic (like the creatures in *Pesky Plastic*). Nevertheless, the plastic, “in forms unconceived and unforeseen, can reach the remote and distant lands to infiltrate the systems of unsuspecting creatures, resulting in the ‘change’ in the biotic” (Ghosh 284). *Pesky Plastic* is woven around a similar concern where the three different species are lured by plastic to consume it. Firstly, Sally – the sea turtle, is enticed by something floating above it in the water and takes it as a jellyfish. But at that very moment, it is warned by the writer: “Wait! Sally, don't eat that. It is a plastic bag!” (Mejias n.p.) Similarly, Pat – the Pelican, notices something on the sea surface and takes it as a fish which eventually turns out to be a plastic bag again. Finally, Allen – the Albatross, while waiting for its mother, is attracted by a plastic object stranded on the uninhabitable shore which he takes as food. Indisputably, all these creatures need food for survival. When they find more plastic than fish, they “cannot tell the difference between plastic and food” (Mejias n.p.). Rather, the plastic debris looks “exciting and aberrational, making and seducing” these sea creatures to “pick plastic as food and food as plastic for them and their younger ones” (Ghosh 285). The case of the Albatross becomes more significant here. Notably, Albatross resides in an inaccessible part of the planet which is beyond human reach. But

plastic manages not only to access these uninhabitable corners but also leaves behind its impact. It reaches the digestive tracts of the mother Albatross and the young ones, fed with regurgitation. What is more, plastic can taint the food chain as the smaller creature which feeds upon plastic becomes toxic for the bigger creature. In this manner, plastic ingestion eventually spawns plastic deaths or perhaps aquacide/ecocide.

Such plastic exposure not only deludes aquatic life into "trick ingestion through its colour and shape and appearance" but also attracts terrestrial animals (Ghosh 286). In *One Plastic Bag*, a lot of village goats die as they forage through trash and eat plastic bags which "twist around their intestines, and the animals cannot survive" (Paul n.p.). The sight of dying goats due to plastic becomes disheartening for now grown-up Isatou who feels disillusioned. When the reality of plastic invades 'plastopia,' Modern Frankenstein and Isatou, the boy in *A Planet Full of Plastic*, feel repelled and shocked. The 'plastopia' envisioned earlier now becomes infested with dirt, squalor and deaths, unattractive and deemed uninhabitable. In terror, the boy in *A Planet Full of Plastic* exclaims: "But I don't want animals to get hurt! And I don't want our planet to fill up with plastic" (Layton n.p.). His aversion to plastic generates a dialectic of 'plastic memory' and 'plastic guilt' (terms coined here). The memory of the overindulgence in plastic and 'plastic abuse' evokes the guilt of spawning evil and death, sealing the "ecocidal fate" of life on earth (Ghosh 283). This plastic memory-guilt dialectic (a term coined here) can be alleviated, to some extent, by adopting the "poetics of responsibility...which does not concern with what we humans *are*,...but with what we humans *do*" (Garrard 79). The eco-critical approach, in this sense, becomes "a more effective rhetoric of transformation and assuagement" (Garrard 79). This would call for a "response-ability on a damaged earth," a healing response to the wounded ecology (qtd. in Ghosh 287). To this end, the human race necessitates marching from being anthropocentric to eco-centric in fulfilling the claims of both responsibility and responseability.

All four texts discussed above convincingly portray the poetics of responsibility and response-ability to plastic peril. They

encourage formulating a 'plastic brotherhood of eco-warriors and toxic relievers' who work collectively to bring a new order. Indeed, Layton's call for group effort proves worthy here: "It'll take each and every person working together to stop the planet filling up with plastic" (n.p.). He further suggests a tripartite strategy to clear up the plastic mess—reduce, reuse and recycle—which is also upheld by Leticia Colon de Majias in *Pesky Plastic*. Both writers reason if we limit plastic usage, we can reduce the pollution it causes. Even the manufacturers need to contemplate before producing plastic objects which have a shorter utilitarian span in comparison to their shelf life. Further, the plastic objects must be reused "over and over again" (Layton n.p.). Finally, the used plastic things can be recycled into newer forms. As Ghosh says, "plastic continues to spread and is recycled, enhancing the complex networks of access and excess" (278). This idea is best illustrated in *One Plastic Bag*. Assessing the toxic impact of plastic bags on the surroundings, Isatou gains plastic consciousness and decides to recycle the bags. Overpowering her disgust, she ventures into the repulsive garbage dump and courageously plucks plastic bags from the garbage pile. With the help of her friends, she washes off the dirty bags, cuts them into strips and rolls them into spools in order to crochet them into beautiful purses. These 'eco-warriors and toxic relievers' (terms coined here) crochet day and night and acquire blistered fingers. While the rest of the villagers mock them as dirty for doing filthy work, the group effort of Isatou's team is soon rewarded when her recycled purses become a huge success in the city. The sold-out purses not only solve the problem of plastic management but also wring in more money. With Isatou's recycling, the plastic pile is reduced in size and she hopes that one day it shall be gone leaving her village green and clean. It is here that the book comes to a full circle—setting off with pre-plastic time when Isatou first notices plastic to post-plastic time when she succeeds in clearing up the plastic mess.

The idea of cleaning up through teamwork is further elaborated in *Harry Saves the Ocean!* When Harry is confronted with the problem of plastic litter in the sea and onshore, he pledges to do the needful. In order to alleviate the distress of aquatic partners, the terrestrial being forms its own "beach clean-up crew," declaring, "if

we all lend a hand, we'll soon make a difference to the sea and the sand" (N.G.K. and Fae n.p.). He ropes in seagulls, turtles, puffins, pelicans, and crabs in conjunction with the other mice. Unanimously, they clear up the beach and put the trash in degradable and non-biodegradable trash bins. One may wonder how plastic connects all to a common front to save the world from plastic peril. Arguably, such kind of exposure to plastic abuse through literature heightens the environmental sensitivity of the children who acquire a renewed plastic consciousness: "plastic discarded is plastic left unguarded" (Ghosh 280). The children further attempt to explore and appreciate their surroundings by adopting the damage control strategy as suggested in the preceding discussion through group effort, where they get trained for community service in future. There is no denying the fact that the topics like ecological concerns and plastic abuse seem dull and unappealing to children. So, to make them interesting, it lies in the capacity of the writers to strike a chord with the young ward's imaginative capabilities. While *A Planet Full of Plastic* and *One Plastic Bag* begin by attracting the children with the promising 'plastopia,' *Harry Saves the Ocean!* and *Pesky Plastic* opens with a dramatic situation wherein the animals are shown on the verge of danger: the whale is stuck in a plastic bag and Sally, the sea turtle, is about to eat a plastic bag for breakfast. Such a compelling opening at once captivates the children who relate to the endangered species and show concern and sympathy.

The Questionnaire: Testifying the Efficacy of Plastic Consciousness Adopted in Selected Texts

The current part of the paper premises upon answering the final question posed at the beginning. In order to map the efficacy of the plastic consciousness adopted in the four children's books, the research ventures into the domain of fieldwork. It worked at two levels. About 100 children ranging between the ages of 5-10 years were first exposed to the selected texts. While narrating the texts, it was stressed that children become aware of the plastic consciousness and as the narratives proceed, they acquire environmental sensitivity naturally by underpinning the essential pointers. In the next step, a questionnaire was circulated amongst

them to be answered with the guidance of their parents wherever required. It addressed the questions like: What have you learnt about plastic—is it good or bad? We can sort plastic waste by segregating it into separate bio-degradable and non-degradable bins so that each can be treated accordingly—do you agree? Do you think we can reduce plastic pollution by not spreading plastic litter at home, avoiding throwing plastic wrappers and bottles outside the windows of the car, buying less disposable plastic, switching over to things made of bio-degradable materials like steel lunch boxes, bottles and straws etc.? We can reuse plastic many times by sharing things and toys, taking care of plastic objects and keeping them in good health so that they are durable—do you agree? We can recycle plastic by using plastic in craft, using plastic bottles as planters, and putting plastic bottles in recycling machines installed in public places—do you agree? Do you envision that one day, the world will be plastic-free—yes or no? Are you ready to make any promises today to solve this problem?

The analysis of the collected questionnaires shows that around 95 per cent of the children find plastic bad, and they want to reduce, reuse and recycle in order to make their world and future plastic free. They confessed that the reading of the four texts helped them to acquire new plastic consciousness, and herewith they will become more careful with plastic management. They even pledged that their plastic use would never become plastic abuse for the environment. They promised to say no to plastic straws, spoons, knives, and forks, avoid plastic carrier bags and switch over to reusable cloth bags, urge parents to use glass containers rather than plastic ones in the kitchen, use shampoo, conditioner, and soap bars as opposed to the liquid ones, snack on fruit, instead of crisps or sweets packed in plastic wrappers, use natural materials such as bamboo, recycled wood, glass, cork, etc., use reusable water bottles and steel tiffin, make green goody bags for their next birthday party, eat ice cream from a cone than a plastic cup, when hanging out washing use wooden pegs than plastic ones, and, go litter picking outside and play bad plastic hunt inside the house with parents and friends on holidays.

Conclusion

The above discussion and analysis indicate that plastic pollution is an unrelenting universal challenge due to the almost insurmountable danger it poses by having annexed and encroached on the most unfathomable parts of the oceans and the zeniths of the highest and the remotest mountains. It cannot be ignored that notwithstanding all-pervasive cognisance that the unwarranted use of plastics is leading to disproportionate environmental mutilation, the production of plastic is continuously mounting. We are nowhere close to the end of the 'plastopia.' The use of a tripartite approach investigates the relationship between Shelly's Victor Frankenstein and Modern Frankenstein. The first part of the paper elucidates how the activities of Modern Frankenstein gave birth to plastic and plastic products and his realisation of the eco-toxicological consequences of plastic assimilation in the living and non-living environments has led to efforts to control this pollution. The second part examines the representation of plastic in *A Planet Full of Plastic: and how you can help* by Neal Layton, *Pesky Plastic: An Environmental Story* by Leticia Colon De Mejias, *Harry Saves the Ocean!* by N.G.K. and Sylva Fae, and *One Plastic Bag: Isatou Ceesay and the Recycling Women of the Gambia* by Miranda Paul from the eco-critical lens. It establishes that children's literature is spreading plastic consciousness and ecological sensitivity through instructive-cum-entertaining narratives. It has been found that all four selected texts credibly represent the poetics of responsibility and response-ability towards the abuse of plastic. They inspire their readers, both young and adult, to become 'eco-warriors and toxic relievers' to bring a new order. The assessment of their plastic consciousness made through the medium of a questionnaire, discussed in the third part of the paper, proposes that such methodologies can raise the plastic consciousness among children, who are the building block of the whole world. The inculcation of environmental sensitivity in young minds through such interesting and educational narratives can propel them into action to save the environment. Although different methods and strategies have been adopted to control the plastic mess, but it still remains a problematic issue which doges any simple solutions. Undoubtedly, plastic has become such a powerful creation that it has begun to dominate its

creator – the Modern Frankenstein. It has superseded its creator in almost every sphere who now needs to rethink its existence and way of life vis-à-vis plastic and this can be an interesting subject for a deeper probe in future.

Works Cited

- Alimao, Stacy. *Exposed Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times*. University of Minnesota Press, 2016.
- Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*. Penguin, 1962.
- Colon de Mejias, Leticia. *Pesky Planet: An Environmental Story*. Illustrated by Tamara Visco, Great Book 4 Kids, 2013.
- Freinkel, Susan. *Plastic: A Toxic Love Story*. Houghton Mifflin Hartcourt, 2011.
- Ghosh, Ranjan. *The Plastic Turn*. Cornell UP, 2022.
- . “Plastic Literature” *University of Toronto Quarterly*, University of Toronto Press, Vol. 88, No. 2, Spring 2019, 277-291.
- Glotfelty, Cheryll, and Harold Fromm, editors. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. University of Georgia Press, 1996.
- Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. Routledge, 2012.
- Layton, Neal. *A Planet Full of Plastic: and How You Can Help*. Illustrated by Layton, Wren and Rook, 2019.
- N.G.K., and Sylva Fae. *Harry Saves the Ocean!*. Illustrated by Janelle Dimmett, N.G.K., 2019.
- Patterson, G. *Polymer Science from 1935–1953: Consolidating the Paradigm*. Springer, 2014.
- Paul, Miranda. *One Plastic Bag: Isatou Ceesay and the Recycling Women of the Gambia*. Illustrated by Elizabeth Zunon, Millbrook Press, 2015.
- Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus*. David Campbell Publishers Ltd., 1992.



Legacies that Survive Across Time and Space: A Critical Reading of The “Trickster” Character Anansi from West African Folklore

Sarita G^{*}

Abstract

Africa has a wealth of legends and folktales that form an integral part of the collective consciousness of the country. The article is an exploration of the insight folktales can offer, as popular culture, for an understanding of the country's unique cultural tradition and orientation. The popularity of the folktales bears testimony to the fact the people of Africa continue to draw inspiration and strength from the basic concepts and philosophies of life developed by their forefathers thousands of years ago. The paper focuses attention on select stories centring Anansi, a trickster character from the African folktales of the Ashanti people of Ghana, a country in West Africa.

Keywords: African folktale, trickster character, cultural inheritance, collective consciousness

Folklores handed down through generations either by word of mouth or through carefully stored scriptures form the very backbone of every nation's cultural legacy. “Go back where you started, or as far back as you can, examine all of it, travel your road again and tell the truth about it. Sing it or shout or testify or keep it to yourself: but know whence you came” (Field). Storytelling has a significant role in indoctrinating generations about cultural roots and strengthening bonds. A folktale is a story that originated from an oral tradition and is passed down to subsequent generations. Folktales employ a technique of narration in which the story progresses mainly through action and dialogue with lesser interventions in the form of descriptions or comments. At the same time, like all storytelling forms, they require the audience to actively participate in comprehending the story, deciphering the words, the gestures and the

^{*} Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Government College for Women, Thiruvananthapuram.

sound effects and creating their own visualisations of the tale. The strength of the oral tale is that the listener employs personal experiences and background to not only enrich but also individualise it. Oral literature, the oldest of all literature forms, includes proverbs, poems, and narratives. By imparting meaningful lessons in cultural literacy, they preserve and shape history and also convey both complex messages and simple ethics to the young. Africa has a wealth of legends and folklore that go back beyond human memory. African folktales serve as links connecting the past with the present and the future as well. These legends and folktales “are repositories of memory and serve as sources for indigenous histories, cultures and religions” (Adogame 9). They play a significant role in negotiating identities based on gender, age and education. They also serve to transmit artefacts of culture and tradition and impart moral lessons to prepare the young for the challenges confronting them. Sometimes the stories were acted out by the storyteller or even sung with dancing and drumming. The ‘moonlight tales’ emerged from the traditional practice of storytelling by the elders, sitting around a village fire under the moonlight. An exploration of Africa’s socio-cultural scenario will reveal that the society still draws inspiration and strength from the basic concepts and philosophies of life that evolved from orature ages ago. In African folktales, each culture has an animal-specific to it to demonstrate virtues like kindness, truthfulness and forbearance.

This study attempts to explore the “trickster” folktales as alternate ways of advocating the voice and aspirations of the people of Africa. The investigation specifically focuses on Anansi, the central character in the African folktales of the Ashanti people of Ghana, a country in West Africa. The character Anansi is the trickster spider of Akan origin, taken from the long-established culture, the Ashanti of West Africa. The term 'Akan' denotes a West African ethnolinguistic group comprising different subgroups. Among them, the most predominant is the Asante, also spelt Ashanti, who are based in Central Ghana. Ghana is immensely protective of the oral tradition. It is their strict adherence to the ancestral culture despite external influences, including the arrival of Christianity, that distinguishes the

Akans from the rest of the groups (Williamson 35). The Akans are known for their respect for elders and genuine regard for ancestral roots. They ascribe great importance to the preservation of the antiquity of their culture of many centuries. The book *Cultural Memory: Resistance, Faith, and Identity* discusses how human cultures have survived “threats to their existence through their ability to interpret, adapt to, and resist hegemonic cultures that are more powerful”. The historically marginalised groups develop cultural symbols to resist “annihilation from dominant groups by accessing forms of spiritual resistance” (Rodriguez 1). Many of the folklore are spiritually or religiously inspired. Ghanaian ethnic groups hold belief in the existence of a hierarchy of spiritual powers and Akan culture is inseparable from spirituality (Salm 39). The lesser gods are usually associated with elements of nature, like rivers, trees and mountains.

Anansi tales reflect mainly the elements of the Asante cultural framework. In West Indian Islands, "Anansi" is the name of a spider in the Ashanti language and of a spider with yellow stripes. The Ashanti term, *Anansesem*, means spider stories and is generally used for all folktales dealing with animals. Anansi has a place of importance in the religious sphere though there is no actual evidence to suggest that he was one of the gods himself. There are a lot of discrepancies regarding the story of his origin, as in the case of disparities that involve most folktales, mainly due to the modifications they undergo as they are handed down. In the folktales, he appears as a West African god who frequently assumes the shape of a spider and is considered to be the life force of all knowledge of all the stories on earth. But he is neither worshipped nor has any shrines to his name. Anansi also appears as a trickster, a rogue, and an animal with human traits. Tricksters from folktales not only entertain with their antics but also teach us a lesson or two. The trickster is a cultural phenomenon prevalent in several societies across the globe. Like most trickster figures in mythologies, Anansi is characterised by ingenuity and defeats his adversaries, illustrating the superiority of intelligence over brute strength. He outwits everyone, sometimes even the deities. He is wise but he can also be cunning, greedy and dishonest. Anansi uses his deviousness to overcome overwhelming odds and achieve what he wants. Anansi is

considered an intersectional figure connecting the world of humans with that of the Asante Supreme Being Nyame. However, Anansi wreaks havoc in both worlds, destabilising even the omnipotent Nyame. His engagements are notoriously deleterious as he often upends socio-biological rules by changing form, gender and executes heinous actions like eating his own children. The stories are not exclusive to West African ancestry as he has come to possess the status of a folk hero among all ethnic groups. It is believed that from Ghana, the stories spread through the whole of West Africa. Later during the Atlantic slave trade, the oral tradition took them beyond the seas to the Caribbean along with the slaves. As Anansi journeyed from West Africa to Jamaica, he was celebrated as a national folk hero. Anansi also survived a cultural transmutation and came to symbolise by his devious ways the resistance of the Jamaican people to slavery and repression. Anansi takes the moniker 'Nansi' in Guyana and other Caribbean countries. *The Magic Pot: Nansi Stories from the Caribbean* by Odeen Ishmael is a collection of popular folk stories from Guyana and other countries of the Caribbean region. The central character in the stories is Nansi, whose exploits form part of the folklore of these countries. In Haiti, he is called 'Ti Malice'. He can assume any shape he wants. Sometimes he takes the form of a man or even half-man and half-spider.

The study introduces a few children's books that treat the Anansi folktales in the hope that it will open up possibilities for influential research leading to new theoretical ideas. The paper analyses how the earlier archetype serves as the "template that a culture creates in order to shape the world into a recognisable and meaningful reality" (Bantley 79-180). The contemporary forms follow the legends yet become "fresh incarnation of the traditional" (Connerton 63). Anansi's tales are fine illustrations of the Beast Epic, a popular genre consisting of a protracted series of animal tales that provide satirical commentaries on human foibles. Although many of the stories are drawn from fables, the beast epic differs in that the moral lesson is disregarded.

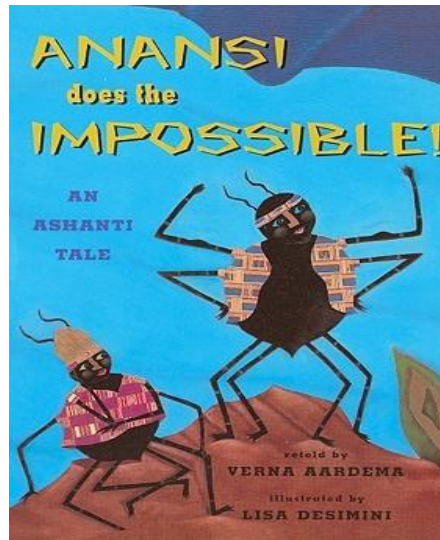


Figure 1: Verna Aardema, *Anansi Does The Impossible! An Ashanti Tale*, 2000.

“Anansi Does The Impossible! An Ashanti Tale” is a folktale from Ghana that tells the story of how Anansi buys back the folktales from the Sky God. This African folk tale story claims to be where the Anansi stories begin. Anansi is a small spider that uses wile and courage to achieve the impossible. Long ago, at the time of the creation of the earth and the sky, all the folktales were owned by the Sky God. Anansi, that cunning little spider, was determined to buy them back. But the price he was asked to give was nothing less than a live python, one real fairy, and forty-seven stinging hornets. That was actually not a huge price considering the treasure of folktales that would come into his possession. But it was a daunting task for a spider. He decided to seek help from his clever wife, Aso. Thus Anansi joins hands with his better half in an ingenious scheme and achieves the impossible. Anansi succeeds in winning the stories and the villagers honour Anansi and Aso by naming the stories of West Africa ‘Anansi Tales’. In this retelling, the writer Verna Aardema presents a different incarnation of Anansi in this story where he is not the lazy, trickster spider. The story is different from the other Anansi stories. In most of the folktales, Anansi is a trickster playing nasty tricks on people. And his plans always backfire. In this story, the plan

hatched by Anansi and his wife is executed successfully. Several folk cultures consider women imprudent and not worthy of respect. But the Ashanti people who live in Ashantiland (formerly known as Ashanti Empire) on the Gulf of Guinea, are a matrilineal community. Here Anansi's wife Asa is presented as a smart, resourceful woman who ably helps her husband accomplish the seemingly impossible task. The ideophones and sound effects, along with the sprightly dialogues used by Aaderma, create the feel of a "read-aloud" story for children. The artwork using deep colours captures the essence of the story and brings to life the forgotten roots and traditions of West Africa. The illustrations showing Anansi in a defiant stance challenging the Sky God, a massive, incorporeal form, are symbolically significant. It is believed that all the stories in the world belong to Anansi. "African Tales (One World, One Planet)" by Gcina Mhlophe and Rachel Griffin is a beautiful collection of tales from several African countries: Namibia, Malawi, Lesotho, Swaziland, Senegal, Ghana, Sudan, and Ethiopia. The book includes another version of "Anansi and the Impossible Quest". It offers a brief country introduction before each respective tale and a detailed list of sources for each country in addition to the magnificent artwork that embellishes each page. "Anansi and The Box of Stories (On My Own Folklore)", adapted by Stephen Krensky, also tells the same story of the sky god Nyame who keeps all the stories of the world to himself. But he agrees to trade the stories if Anansi would perform four seemingly impossible tasks. "Anansi & the Moss-Covered Rock" retold by Eric A Kimmel and illustrated by Janet Stevens, is another brilliant trickster story. Anansi discovers that a strange moss-covered rock in the forest has the power to put to sleep for hours anyone who comments on it. They wake up hours later, unable to comprehend what had happened. Anansi uses this knowledge to trick all other animals and steal their food. But Anansi is outwitted by Little Bush Deer, who was hiding in the forest bush and watching it all. She invents a plan to teach Anansi a lesson and make him return all the food he had stolen.

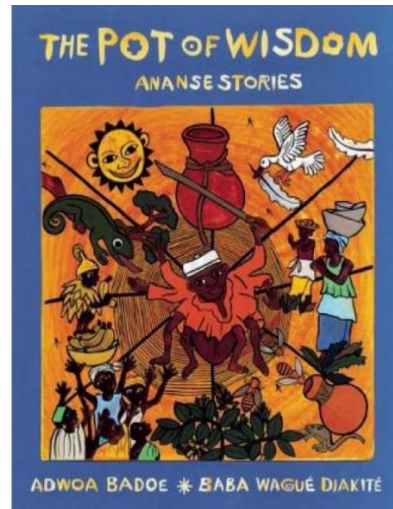


Figure 2: Adwoa Badoe, *The Pot of Wisdom: Ananse Stories*, 2008.

“The Pot of Wisdom: Ananse Stories” by Adwoa Badoe is a collection of ten Anansi stories, Badoe heard when she was a child. The illustrations by Malian artist Baba Wagué Diakité brilliantly complement the stories. These ‘pourquoi’ stories enlighten and entertain the readers with amusing revelations regarding how the pig lost his trunk and ended up with a snout, why the chameleon changes its colours, why Ananse spins webs rather than flies, and various other enlightenments about West African animals. In the story “Why Ananse Lived on the Ceiling”, the spider trickster climbs up to the highest corner of the house, ashamed as he is, at being caught stealing food from his sons. In “Ananse and the Feeding Pot”, Anansi is depicted as being jealous of his own son, Ntikuma. He suffers humiliation before the entire village because of his inability to follow directions. “Ananse Becomes the Owner of Stories” chronicles the spider’s adventure while capturing an entire house of honeybees, and “Ananse, the Even-handed Judge” presents his attempt to attend a funeral and wedding at the same time that ends disastrously. The vibrant illustrations present an assemblage of West African animals also.

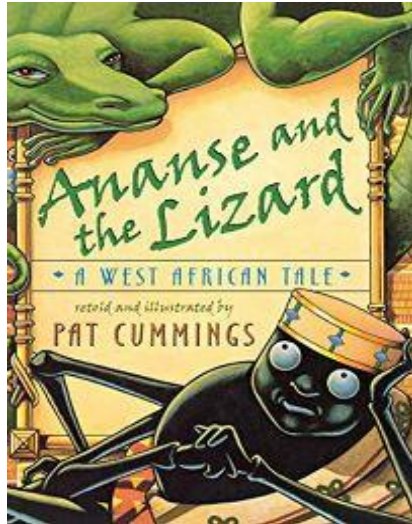


Figure 3: Pat Cummings, *Ananse and the Lizard: A West African Tale*, 2002.

In “Ananse and the Lizard: A West African Tale” retold and illustrated by Pat Cummings, the Chief announces that he will give his daughter’s hand in marriage to anyone who can guess her name. He would also receive half his fortune. Ananse comes upon a guard saying the daughter’s name Ahoafe and decides that he would be the guy to win her. He brags to the other animals about how he discovered the name of the Chief’s daughter. The Lizard, however, turns out smarter than Anansi. He gets Anansi to reveal the girl’s name and wins the Chief’s daughter. Anansi swears to tear him apart limb by limb if ever the lizard happens to cross his path again. The story tells us that this is the reason why lizards always seem nervous and always stick their necks out, looking in all directions. In the story, it is the lizard who is shown as devious and wicked. The spider is an upright, helpless character and not the trickster as he appears in other stories. This story carries the message that strangers are not to be trusted. This is one of the tales where the spider’s plan of trickery backfires. “Anansi the Spider: A Tale from the Ashanti” by Gerald McDermott is based on another folktale circulated orally among African people. In this tale, Anansi the Spider, one of the great folk heroes of the world, is presented as a trickster. He is, nevertheless, a

wise and affable creature who triumphs over bigger adversaries. In this traditional Ashanti tale, Anansi, a spider with human-like qualities, names his sons according to a specific ability each one possesses. He then goes off on a journey and gets in trouble. Anansi is saved from Fish and Falcon by his sons, who use their unique abilities to help Anansi. Upon being rescued, Anansi proclaims that he will reward the son who rescued him with a beautiful white light. Now he is unable to decide whom he should reward and calls upon Nyame, the God of All Things, to find his way out of the dilemma. Anansi asks the God of All Things to hold the light as he decides the winner. However, the spider family starts arguing, and Nyame, vexed by this, puts the light up in the sky forever. The story thus offers an explanation for the white light in the sky at night. Gerald McDermott adapted this popular folktale by combining the traditional with the modern, the vibrant colour with conventional African design motifs and genuine Ashanti language cadences.

In “Ananse’s Feast: An Ashanti Tale” retold by Tololwa M. Moles, Ananse lives up to his name as a mischievous trickster. However, it is impossible not to like Ananse, who is so witty and resourceful. In this story, Ananse the spider is the only one who has food stored away and all the other animals are starving. Ananse’s friend Akye the turtle smells out the food and ends up at his house. When Akye, the turtle, knocks, Ananse feels obliged to invite him to share his food. Anansi dupes his friend into leaving the table several times, during which Ananse finishes all the food. Even though Akye recognises that he has been tricked, he remains nice. But later, the turtle turns the tables on his friend by inviting Ananse to a feast at the bottom of the river. Ananse is able to stay underwater only by the weight of the pebbles he carries in the pockets of his robe. But Akye insists that he removes the robe as a matter of courtesy. But as soon as he takes off the robe, he is pulled upwards and Ananse starts drifting away from the food. The turtle thus pays back in the same coin. The story ends with Akye describing how delicious the feast was, causing Anansi more distress. The story teaches a lesson on how guests are to be treated and also on the importance of friendships. Most of the stories end with Anansi learning a lesson in the end. According to Christen, Anansi exemplifies the duality of human nature and the negative aspects of antisocial behaviour, forewarning

"the presence of greed, trickery, and disruptiveness in the world" (10).

The folklores provide invaluable insights into the culture and tradition of the Ashanti, and hence revived as part of the indigenous effort to reflect the experiences, struggles and cultures of African countries without any influence from the West. Rewriting the folklores and narratives that form part of the oral tradition is a postcolonial attempt at valorising their native heritage to compel the Western world to take notice of the culture that is truly their own. They become a counter-discourse to set right the wrongs done to them by bringing about a restoration of the beauty and value of their cultural past and tradition. The trickster theme has been used to describe both the authors and the contemporary literature of postcolonial Africa. Assuming the role of political critics, the writers become tricksters exposing and outwitting the colonial and post-independence negotiators of oppression through stories told from the perspectives of the powerless. Underscoring the dissident character of African postcolonial literature, Nadia Gada refers to the African creative writers as "intellectual tricksters" (Dube 57). Roger Kurtz goes further to say that sometimes "entire texts function as tricksters, making subversive reading available" (317). The trickster perspective is the recognition of vulnerability and not powerlessness against oppressors. A trickster reading perspective underscores the power to resist, subsist, and release oneself from the forces of oppression. It would not be incorrect to say that in the collective consciousness of the country, the myths actually survive in these folktales that are the true artefacts of every culture. Indeed, folktales have always been a vital way to transmit important information, as well as moral lessons. They are often contextualised both in terms of time and space. Yet the folktales are not only timeless but also universal. The right way to preserve folktales is to reimagine and reinvent them to resonate with the present. As they are symbolic expressions, adding a contemporary twist to the traditional folktales would ensure their continued presence in this age of science and reason more efficiently.

Recognition of the huge possibilities of popular culture media for rigorous inquiry, drawing out the undercurrents of mythology and folklore, has resulted in increased awareness about cultures across the

world. Of late, there has also been an exploration of alternative mediums for the preservation and transmission of folklore, transcending the boundaries of language, time, age and geography. Anansi stories have several variants, and the one in the US goes by the name “Aunt Nancy”. He is also known as Ananse, Kwaku Ananse, and Anancy. Anansi, the Spider, makes his appearance in the television program ‘Static Shock’, as a major superhero from Africa. Anansi belongs to a lineage of heroes who derive his powers from an ancient amulet which grants powers of illusion and the ability to adhere to any surface. Neil Gaiman’s novel ‘American Gods’ features Anansi under the name Mr Nancy, along with other mythological characters. Another novel, ‘Anansi Boys’, by the same author, is not exactly a sequel. However, it tells the story of the sons of Anansi as they discover each other and their heritage. The character of Mr Nancy, an incarnation of the West African trickster god Anansi appears in both books. Interestingly the name of the spider-man of the West African folk tales has been adopted by an English rock band called “Skunk Anansie”. In an arc of DC Comics’ Justice League of America, the team has an encounter with Anansi. Anansi appears in different avatars, the most common form being a large, other-worldly spider with supernatural powers. Marvel Comics brought out a mini-series titled “Spider-Man Fairy Tales” in which Spider-Man takes on the role of Anansi. In the PC game, “Pandora’s Box”, Pandora unleashes chaos in the form of seven trickster gods into the world, and Anansi is one of them. Numerous folklorists have expressed concern over this migration “from folklore into popular culture where they become stereotyped, standardised, exploited, commodified, and repackaged in a number of ways” (Brunvand xxvii). This could very well herald the death of the oral-narrative genre.

Another significant issue that merits deliberation is the fact that Anansi is part of an exclusively oral tradition and would have gone through transmutations during the process of transference to the literary tradition. It was Robert Sutherland Rattray (Captain R. S. Rattray) a Scottish anthropologist working for the British colonial government in Ghana, who had recorded many of these tales in both the English and Twi, a dialect of the Akan language. One of the first compilations of folk stories for children was compiled by Sir Phillip

Sherlock in his *West Indian Folktales* (1966), which also included retellings of the exploits of Anansi. Andrew Salkey, a Jamaican author, considered a pioneer in West Indian children's literature, is the author of *Anancy's Score*. Salkey used for narration a mix of Creole with Standard English, both in the speech of his characters and also for the portrayal of the narrator (Stevenson 55).

Though the main thrust was on instruction and moralising, there is also the propensity to use the tales to generate jocularity when the oral and folk tradition passes into the literature (Foster 77). Yet it cannot be denied that the recent development of the narratives from the oral tradition to the electronic or popular culture forms has resulted in lesser variations to the traditional story. As far as the legends transmitted orally, there was the risk of minor details being modified to rectify ambiguities. But the contemporary adaptations have eliminated this threat to a large extent as these, along with the online circulated legends, are recorded in letters and can preserve them in their true uncorrupt form as if they are set in stone. The folklores are indeed worthy of academic importance and scrutiny as cultural identities are under constant threat from the onslaught of modernism. Folklores serve to frame the identity and activate memories about their true culture. They impact social and ethical behaviours by playing the more responsible role of a form that is constructive and didactic. They also reveal the negative side of humans including emotions of jealousy, hatred and rivalry. They are a form of cultural resistance achieved through a revival of mythological and historical narratives. It is possible to trace their impact on cultural and collective memory. Collective memory is a crucial social construct that can preserve and shape the cultural and sociopolitical identity of a nation. Appreciation and contextualisation of the folklores within memory and culture studies will pave the way for rigorous inquiry and draw out the undercurrents of the oral tradition. Credibility has always been an issue with myths and folktales in the modern age. Even when the modern mind distances itself from the characters and situations, the perpetuity of the mythical realms throughout all time gives these stories a primordial essence and a universal appeal. They can also function as springboards to discussions on ethical standards and varied worldviews.

Finally, to sum up the discourse, it may be understood that culture is concerned with identity, aspiration, and customs and practices that serve purposes such as ethnicity, heritage, norms, meanings and beliefs. Myths are stories that sensationalise values, ethics and customs of life. This is also true of the folktales that transmit social myths and ideology through narrative structures and conventional formulas. By virtue of its raciness and kinetic quality, folktales still continue and will remain the best possible vehicle for cultural transmission in this age of globalisation and cultural homogenisation.

Works Cited

- Aaderma, Verna. *Anansi Does the Impossible! An Ashanti Tale*. Demco Media, 2000.
- Adogame, Afe. *Indigeneity in African Religions: Oza Worldviews, Cosmologies and Religious Cultures*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021.
- Badoe, Adwoa. *The Pot of Wisdom: Ananse Stories*. Groundwood Books, 2008.
- Bantley Francisca Cho. "Archetypes of Selves: A Study of the Chinese Mytho-Historical Consciousness." *Myth and Method*, edited by Laurie L. Patton, Wendy Doniger, University Press of Virginia, 1996, pp. 109-127.
- Brunvand, J.H. *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends*. W.W. Norton and Company, 2001.
- Christen, K.A. *Clowns and Tricksters: An Encyclopedia of Tradition and Culture*. ABC-CLIO, Inc., 1998.
- Connerton, Paul. *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge UP, 1989.
- Cummings, Pat. *Ananse and the Lizard: A West African Tale*. Henry Holt and Company, 2002.
- Dube, Musa W. "The Subaltern Can Speak: Reading the Mmutle (Hare) Way." *Journal of Africana Religions*, vol. 4, no. 1, Penn State UP, 2016, pp. 54-75.
- Field, Douglas. "Know Whence You Came". *The Guardian*. 15 Nov. 2003, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/nov/15/fiction.jamesbaldwin>
- Foster, Michael Dylan. "The Challenge of the Folkloresque." *The Folkloresque: Reframing Folklore in a Popular Culture World*, edited by Michael Dylan Foster and Jeffrey A. Tolbert, University Press of Colorado, 2015, pp. 3-34.
- Gaiman, Neil. *American Gods*. Headline, 2011.
- . *Anansi Boys*. HarperCollins, 2009.

- Ishmael, Odeen. *The Magic Pot: Anansi Stories from the Caribbean*. Xlibris. 2010.
- Kimmel, Eric A. *Anansi and the Moss Covered Rock*. Live Oak Media, 1988.
- Krensky, Stephen. *Anansi and the Box of Stories: A West African Folktale*. Millbrook Press, 2008.
- Kurtz, Roger J. "Peter Nazareth". *Postcolonial African Writers: A Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*, edited by Pushpa N. Parekh and Siga Fatima Jagne, Greenwood, 1998, pp 137-152.
- McDermott, Gerald. *Anansi the Spider: A Tale from the Ashanti*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 2009.
- Molel, Tololwa M. *Ananse's Feast: An Ashanti Tale*. Houghton Mifflin, 1997.
- Rattray, R. S. *Religion and Art in Ashanti*. Clarendon Press, 1927.
- Rodriguez, Jeanette, and Fortier, Ted. *Cultural Memory: Resistance, Faith, and Identity*. University of Texas Press, 2007.
- Salm, Steven J. and Falola, Toyin. *Culture and Customs of Ghana*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2002.
- Stevenson, Deborah, Karen Coats, et al., editors. *A Companion to Children's Literature*. Wiley, 2022.
- Williamson, Sidney George. *Akan Religion and the Christian Faith: A Comparative Study of the Impact of Two Religions*. Ghana UP, 1959.



Memories, Metaphors, and Maladies in War and Partition: Revisiting Three Films from India and Bangladesh

Sreetanwi Chakraborty*

Abstract

The large corpus of partition literature, films, diaries, memoirs, and letters are all replete with a sense of loss, the excruciating pain of getting supplanted from the roots, and a premonition of endless anxiety. The partition of India in 1947, the Second World War and the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971 are revived in motion pictures. The present paper discusses three films *Rangoon*, *Kya Dilli Kya Lahore*, and *Amar Bandhu Rashed*, to study the various layers of memory, the relevance of metaphor and the maladies of uprootedness. All three films are a depiction of violence and memory as represented through various metaphorical devices in the films.

Keywords: Borders, Memories, Partition, Nation, Violence

Introduction:

In the introductory chapter to his celebrated book *In Freedom's Shade*, Anis Qidvai becomes eloquent about the heart-wrenching manner in which partition affects territories, delimits boundaries, and recreates the fallacies and metaphorical representations of social and political borders:

What would those mothers have gone through, as their children were torn from them and hurled into bonfires when young girls were snatched from their parents, wives wrenched from husbands and made to change their religion? Those wives, those sisters, hollowed out by the agonies of their experiences, what Hindus or Muslims they could possibly make? (Qidvai 3)

* Assistant Professor in Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Amity University Kolkata.

The curious yet laborious art of nation-building has, for its pedestal, the structural and often unnegotiated ways of creating borders and boundaries. When we try to dissect the multifaceted versions of liberation, war, struggle, partition, borders, violence, and boundaries in films, literature, memoirs, diaries, articles, and letters, we come across a picture of constant oscillation: an oscillation between 'location' and 'existence', irrespective of sex, gender, class, caste, and creed. Memory appears not just to be an inert archival source of boundaries but as an active catalyst in re-treating and also the retreating of boundaries across nations. Three of the most epoch-making incidents in the convoluted history of wars, nations, and borders are the Second World War from 1939-1945, the partition of India in 1947, and the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971. The subtle political nuances and the mammoth ramifications of the partition and the liberation war have been represented in variegated forms such as letters, reviews, articles, films, and memoirs penned down by individuals and political diplomats.

This paper focuses on three films with different conceptual variations. While the Bangladeshi motion picture *Amar Bandhu Rashed* by the critically acclaimed director Morshedul Islam focuses on the ideals and ideas of nation and liberation from a child's innocuous perspective, the Hindi film *Kya Dilli Kya Lahore* takes a satirical and consistent dig at the entire concept of land-division, borders, protagonists, and antagonists. The unidimensional and often fallacious concept of restructuring borders and nations finds an eloquent expression in both these films. The larger political implications of territorialisation with the sardonic instigation by landholders, policymakers, socialists, bureaucrats, and even by common people occupying different regions of the land. The best part of the film *Amar Bandhu Rashed* is that the concept of the nation is seen from the perspective of school children and how the Liberation War shapes their perspectives of independence, the Liberation soldiers, or the resistance force that fought the Pakistan army. What becomes a subject of exclusive study and close examination in these two films is the way they question and reinstate the theory of nation, border, communal violence, memory, and disintegration of a facile memory. Therefore, recalling the fact that borders and territories are constructed and for what purpose becomes one of the most important

exercises while looking at the thematic and stylistic details of these films. The pangs of violence and disparity in gender representation become more problematic in the 2017 Bollywood release *Rangoon* where love, power, betrayal, politics, and the raging urge for independence and national integration take on numerous twists and turns. Three major characters in the film, Rusi, Jemadar Malik, and Julia, become involved in layers of self-contestation and recognition of a common enemy, the British, as the film progresses. Parallely what runs is the condition of the prisoners of war. The entire terrain of domesticity and allegiance to the nation is questioned at times in this film, as aggressive and violent forms of nationalism can also sometimes be disastrous to the growth and development of any nation.

1.1 Understanding Nation, Nationhood, Violence, and Impulsive Activity: Progress of the Films

Understanding the effect of violence on nation formation is a complex process. It has its own realms of rigidity, and any singlehanded effort to discuss the aftereffects of violence should be unjust. There are shifting terrains of the partition cinema that cannot be compartmentalised with any single critical analysis. For instance, when Bhaskar Sarkar writes about the 1947 Partition in his major work *Mourning the Nation: Indian Cinema in the Wake of Partition*, he correlates the physical, psychic and material, tangible losses that films portray realistically, “Speaking about 1947 remains a difficult task even after the passage of five decades: the corporeal, material and psychic losses, the widespread sense of betrayal, the overwhelming dislocations—in short, the deep lacerations inflicted on one’s sense of self and community—bring up intense and consuming passions” (Sarkar 9).

He further adds that the practical, intense sense of loss cannot be contained as part of an elite or insular kind of academic space. The effects of violence are real, and so are the sense of loss and mourning, “Not long ago, at a meeting of a prestigious South Asia conference, the sober tenor of discussions during a plenary session devoted to partition was interrupted by an upsurge of emotions: serious theoretical discourse simply could not contain the passions, the excessive other of objective, scholarly exegesis.” (Sarkar 10).

Violence, in all its different variations, can be individual as well as collective. The state policies verging on numerous political decisions that have a far-reaching impact can bring about an unexpected dislocation of an entire community, giving rise to violence. In all these films, the microcosmic concept of the individual and the family experience a growing sense of contestation with the macrocosmic idea of the nation. The absolute truth about the perfect nation is constantly demystified in the three films. *Rangoon*, set during the Second World War, revolves around the Indian national struggle during the war. On the one hand, there is a reference to the rise of the Indian National Army after the backdrop of Gandhi's *ahimsa*, and on the other hand, the story focuses on the complication brewing in the Indo-China region. As the film shows, under General Mutaguchi's order, the attack during the war was to be led by Japan and not India. Subhash Chandra Bose says: "No one can stop us from reaching Delhi now. Neither the British nor the Japanese. Prepare for war. The first stop will be here. At Imphal." (Robbins 1–42).

Amidst this warlike situation and violence, love can develop in all its fancies. There is a tumultuous affair between Julia, the lead performer of a dance troupe, and Rusi Billimoria, who is the head of a production house. Julia is sent to the border to uplift the enthusiasm of the soldiers posted in the border area. In the course of the film, she meets Jemadar Malik, a war prisoner, and the two gradually fall in love. There are platoons of Japanese soldiers who are after them; the film shows the anti-aircraft bunkers and various kinds of traps that Malik and Julia confront, and amidst the violence and inefficacy of war, how their love blossoms. This does not evade the eyes of Rusi, and he confirms to Julia that he is extremely aware of her infidelity toward him and is ready to get rid of Malik by any means. On the other hand, Malik is a victim of conflict- for the love of Julia and the cause of the war, land, and soil. 'Love is too small a word' (Robbins 1–42)- this is how both Julia and Malik rekindle their love and still understand how the nation needs to gain its independence. Terrible forces and espionage lead Malik to get imprisoned at times, but gradually, the film reveals that Jemadar did not run away from his captive state in Rangoon, but he was released by the INA as they saw the future potential in him to fight the British rule in India. The film is a poignant commentary on who holds the reign of power and

politics and who suffers in the long run. There is a reference to world dictators like Hitler and Mussolini, but there is also a profound question that while dealing with the global, the common people and the policymakers have failed to see the immediate local threat from the British rule. Cinema is a very powerful medium for communicating a message that has a strong impact on shaping the furtherance of major national goals.

1.2 Identity, Communalism, And A Close Understanding of Humanity in Tough Times

Kya Dilli Kya Lahore is a story of bifurcation, bifurcation between resources and identity, communalism and humanity, and the local and global and individual survival strategy during the war. In a cinematographically impressive way, the story shows how Rehmat Ali, a Pakistani soldier of Indian origin, and Samarth Pratap Shastri, an Indian soldier. The film unfurls against a desolate heath, pitted against the Indo-Pak border, with an intermittent interference of silence and sporadic words. A sudden altercation between the Pakistani soldier of Hindustani origin and the Indian soldier belonging to Lahore leads to certain relevant questions, which are discussed as part of this paper:

- a) Who and what situations decide the formation and the re-formation of borders and memories?
- b) When the Pakistani soldier says an excess was done to us, the Indian army cook replies how everybody thinks the same, thus, validating the question of perspectives about partition and memory through dialogues replete with contemplation and chaos.
- c) What about the members who were not part of the territorialisation? What about those Muslims who stayed back in India and those Hindus who had fond memories of the other side of the borders?

One aspect that becomes complicated in the journey of the two individuals in the film is part of the psyche and memory that remains unexplored to the fullest extent. Nostalgia about Lahore *gullies* or serpentine lanes, feelings about leaving family and getting re-planted as a cook, an underling in the Indian army, Anarkali Bazaar in

Lahore, re-framing of Pakistan and the prospects of intruders, and retelling of history through power dynamics are some of the aspects that this film tries to interrogate. In this connection, it would be appropriate to refer to the work called *Revisiting India's Partition: New Essays on Memory, Culture and Politics*, where the chapter called *Partitions Within* revivifies and elaborates on the interplay of the schematic courses of individual and collective memory across borders. The rigidity of caste, creed, and religion combined with the re-institutionalisation of political identities, surrounding, and dehumanisation have larger consequences in both individual and larger social aspects. As the percipient critic, Jeremy A. Rinker points out in this essay: "In taking a walk through history with local respondents, one can identify the unmet needs of past social and historical trauma. This unmasking of trauma's legacy reveals social spaces for greater understanding of the 'other' and opens the possibility for future-going reconciliation." (Rinker 284).

Trudging along various segments of history thus becomes a struggle for a second phase of independence for both the Hindu and the Muslim characters in the film *Kya Dilli Kya Lahore*. Partial remembering and intentional amnesia can also be two factors one must consider while the characters and the turn of events in the film are examined. Segmented and scattered glimpses of Chandni Chowk, Jama Masjid, and the whiff of *korma* all coalesce into a single whole. In the experiences of the present situation, when the Indian and the Pakistani soldier eat together and share their sorrowful smiles and joyful memories together, they somehow remain as the subservient representatives and tortured devices of an atrocious state system on both sides of the border. As a form of interjected enunciation, therefore, the Indian who helps the Pakistani soldier based on the grounds of humanity becomes an *adhura Pakistani* (half-Pakistani) in the film. In this direction, there can be questioning in the pattern of relocating the memory, which becomes essential:

- a) Whose memory is it, anyway?
- b) Does the memory of the underlings differ a lot from the memory of those in power?
- c) Are the citadels of partition memory and border violence brittle?

- d) What can be the possible consequences of obliterating the memory intentionally? What kind of survival relief does it provide?
- e) Is there any hegemonic and contested structure that the individual characters are trying to rattle against?

This is what Ipshita Chanda points out very adroitly in her chapter titled “Many Pakistans, Half a Village: Interrogating the Discourse of Identity through the Partition Literature of India”, as part of a larger academic project titled *The Indian Partition in Literature and Films: History, Politics and Aesthetics*. In this chapter, Chanda also refers to different shades of counter-discourse, especially when it comes to studying partition and memory studies, “The shades of the opposition in between these extreme positions remain posited upon the variations of the hegemonic structure of thought construction, discourse formation, and affective response. The hegemonic theme itself is accepted as given.” (Chanda 132). Voices become muffled; borders become prominent, and the decision of human beings often dissuade the blurry, almost humongous border strokes, lines, and shades from becoming obsolete and blurred. Through dialogues, a reiteration of scenes, and motion framed across a bioscopic ending and beginning, people keep on creating mapping, borders, and memories. In this connection, the whole concept of 'identity' needs to be examined in different aspects of the term. As far as the fluidity of memory is concerned, it becomes evident from the progression of scenes in the two films that:

- 1) The fallacies of memory and forced memory keep the boundary intact and in place, and as viewers, readers and critics, we keep on jumping over and out again.
- 2) The plurality of memory perspective is represented by the background, setting, and characters.
- 3) Lack of any type of commitment to memory due to the fear of memory contamination and disintegration.

1.3 How Do We Study Commitment to The Nation and a Simultaneous Exploration of Violence and Contamination?

Commitment and contamination go simultaneously; they appear differently to different minds: one for the child who aspires to attain

a solemn stature beyond rectified borders and one for the adult whom both fails and transverses the liberating necessities of hybridity. This is what becomes apparent in the film *Amar Bandhu Rashed*, or *My Friend Rashed* directed by Morshedul Islam. Starting with a quaint and verdurous greenscape where the long shots meander across small Bangladeshi hamlets, village people, schools, teachers, adolescent children carousing all day, and last but not least, a curious sense of inquisitiveness and attachment to the national flag, national identity, and belongingness to one's motherland. Multiple symbols are used to highlight nation, fallacies of memory and borders, and productivity of land in cultural forms. Symbols like re-naming a child named *Lattu* as *Rashed* by the schoolmaster, the ideal called *swadhin Bangla* or independent Bangladesh, the golden and red splashing of colours across a viridian green background on the national flag-indicating *sonar Bangla* or golden and fertile Bangladesh are all instances that project the unanimous and clarion-call of a unified nation and nation-state. In this connection, it would be apt to refer to what Bhaskar Sarkar says about the 'national symbolic' in his seminal text *Mourning the Nation: Indian Cinema in the Wake of Partition*, "The concept of the National Symbolic is useful in understanding Indian popular cinema's promotion of a negotiated national subjectivity capable of projecting its Indianness, and being a citizen of a modern nation-state." (52). Sarkar further elaborates on the fact that, "In this respect, popular films of the period in question can be seen productively as cultural forms that sought to make transformations of national life (to a bourgeois, capitalist, democratic, secular polity) emotionally intelligible to the people." (52).

The productivity in cultural forms that aim to transform a national life transcends time, dates and even years, authenticating the contemporary nature of both these films. What an innocuous child observes, rather visualises territorial violence and national victimisation, becomes nothing short of a memoir or a living repository of partition memories in the larger context of world cinema and partition archives. The archive that has yet another transformation-sharing aspect is the Hindu woman of a Bangladeshi household acting to change her religious affiliation and orientation, getting dressed up in a Muslim *burqa* and leaving her *bhite-mati* (Bengali term for the land where she was born and her earlier

generations lived). This picture stands as the burning document of recreation of a famished memory and an alternate level of amnesia where memories return to plague the body, mind, and spirit not just of an individual mother or wife but also of the nation as a whole. *Amar Bandhu Rashed* preserves and exacerbates memories in a grown-up man who tells the story of how finally Rashed was killed by the military forces who were antagonistic to nation-building. Revisiting partition, history, and historiography from detrimental state and hegemonic forces makes a clear impact as to ‘why’ and ‘how’ we should address the viability and adaptability of the issue of memory through and after partition. Guns and guerrilla warfare trample the very foundation of childhood in the film. Variegated perspectives on child psychology permeate the entire film; the tenacity of Rashed somehow becomes congruent with child stories of the Bangladesh Liberation War, or *Muktiyuddha* represented in films like *The Clay Bird* (2002), *Guerilla* (2011), *Shongram* (2014) and Tareque Masud’s famous documentary *Mukti’r Gaan* (1995). The internalisation of war, liberation, and true freedom thus crosses all theoretical boundaries, creating an alternate branch of the epistemic platform that contest and re-establish memory and border as a universal process. Memory does not blot out the cynic realism of death and destruction in the novel *Amar Bandhu Rashed*, on which the film of the same name is based. The concluding portion of the book is especially worth remembering, where Rashed’s friend Ibu, the narrator, breaks down in tears when he comes to know from two of his other friends Ashraf and Fajlu, that Rashed is no more. Rashed still remains his friend; in the routine humdrum life, he keeps on conversing with Rashed, his closest friend, even after his death. In one such hallucinatory encounter, Ibu asks him, “*Toke jakhan guli karchhilo, tor ki byatha legechhilo?*” (Ikabāla 111). Meaning, when you were being shot, did you feel any pain? And then, Rashed lowers his face and answers with a sullen uncertainty that on the verge of his death, what he yearned for the most was the flora, fauna, rivers, trees, and the broad expansion of sky above Bangladesh, his homeland. The film and the text show Rashed bidding goodbye to Ibu and walking away in slow motion, heaving a sigh of pain, with tremulous eyes, a deep sense of anguish on the world and the whole of humanity. The vigil and the violence of the Bangladesh Liberation War kill Rashed, and he remains only an imaginary, hallucinatory existence for his

friend, as part of his memory, adding to his malady. It should be worth commenting in this direction that when these three motion pictures narrate a composite story of memories through metaphors, they do so while both sustaining and interrogating various centres of power and agencies. Randall Collins points out in his book *Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory* that violence is a mixture of various human emotions that lead to complications like war and mass hatred, “Violence as it actually becomes visible in real-life situations is about the intertwining of human emotions of fear, anger and excitement in ways that run against the conventional morality of normal situations.” (4).

Violence is one of the chief ingredients in the three films discussed here, as violence is connected to the study of memory, and it creates maladies. The metaphorical usage of colour, sound image, setting, and background all metaphorically refer to the acceptance of one’s own soil and a more in-depth study of the nation. For instance, partition in *Kya Dilli Kya Lahore* or *Amar Bandhu Rashed* is not an external act. It is a strong force of internalisation of human values, propositions, and mental masquerades that have been deeply embedded from ancient times. Pride in one’s territory and the invention of survival strategies are then needed, which build up the force and tension of self-recognition. Simultaneously there is also another observation that with power and hierarchy comes the collective sense of subordination of the marginalised groups by the ones in power. It is a complex group dynamic that is shown with a sense of fluidity in feature films. Angus Stewart’s insightful commentary on relationships of power and domination in his book *Theories of Power and Domination: The Politics of Empowerment in Late Modernity* is quite noteworthy to understand this complex nexus and methodology of power that leads to violence, “... an adequate methodology of power requires recognition of a meaningful and identifiable distinction between expressions of wants and preferences and the symbolic and immanent meaning of social practices dissonant with the reproduction of structures of domination.” (44). Hence, the exercise of power is never without a specific ideology and methodology that gets reflected in areas of violence and the retention and exercise of memory.

Conclusion: Collective Memory, Amnesia and War-related Violence

What transpires as a sequential process is a rigorous everyday exercise about memory and amnesia: *Kya Dilli Kya Lahore*, *Rangoon*, and *Amar Bandhu Rashed* metamorphose into an alternative fraternity and do not remain restricted only to films. Fragmented memories creating and negotiating alienation, rootlessness, and violence pass through the lenses of different generations. What we tend to forget, why we forget unintentionally, and why we forget intentionally thus are juxtaposed. A close association with the atrocities inflicted during the 1947 Partition, or during the Liberation War of 1971, thus becomes a cohesive whole in re-discovering one's own self. As an example, to this, we can look at how memory with regard to post-independence and pre-independence Amritsar is looked at by Churnjeet Mahn and Anne Murphy in their work titled *Partition and the Practice of Memory*. What they look at is the intersectional point of the commemoration of memory, as well as forgetfulness associated with certain geopolitical regions during and after the partition. These three films under discussion also do the same. They deploy all the hegemonic tendencies present in a state superstructure, which augments fallacies, metaphors, and maladies associated with partition voices. The interstitial spaces thus remain; they will remain to create new territories, mind-mapping, and borders once more. The partition repository of memory and malady will thus remain inexhaustible. When we look at the existential crisis that the war has already channelised in the mind of the people, we find how maladies become more intense over the future years because the people cannot forget the trauma that is associated with war and partition. Death is not a malady all the time; it is a respite at times, as shown in the films. What remains as a malady is an excruciating memory of living a dreadful life every day.

Works Cited:

Channel i Movies. "Amar Bondhu Rashed." *YouTube*, 4 Oct. 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=iDZfDEu4mUs. Accessed 4 Mar. 2023.
Collins, Randall. *Violence: A Micro-sociological Theory*. Princeton UP, 2009.

- Ikabāla, Muhammada Jāphara. *Āmāra Bandhu Rāśeda*. Dhākā, Bangladesh, Kākalī Prakāśanī, 2013.
- Mahn, Churnjeet, and Anne Murphy. *Partition and the Practice of Memory*. Springer, 2017.
- Mehta, Rini Bhattacharya, and Debali Mookerjea-Leonard. *The Indian Partition in Literature and Films: History, Politics, and Aesthetics*. Routledge, 2014.
- Mishra, Gauri. *Gender and Nationalism: Perspectives on Partition Fiction and Cinema*. Taylor and Francis, 2022.
- Qidvā'ī, Anis. *In Freedom's Shade*. Penguin Books India, 2011.
- Robbins, Matthew. "Rangoon." *Scripts*, www.scripts.com/script-pdf/16588.
- Sarkar, Bhaskar. *Mourning the Nation: Indian Cinema in the Wake of Partition*. Duke UP, 2009.
- Singh, Amritjit, et al. *Revisiting India's Partition: New Essays on Memory, Culture, and Politics*. Lexington Books, 2016.
- Stewart, Angus. *Theories of Power and Domination: The Politics of Empowerment in Late Modernity*. SAGE Publications, 2000.
- YouTV Classic. "Kya Dilli Kya Lahore." *YouTube*, 25 Oct. 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=725_LAzyE8k. Accessed 8 Jan. 2023.



The Politics of (Un)Belonging: Critiquing Select Short Fictions by Janice Pariat

Dustin Lalkulhpuia*, Thongam Dhanajit Singh**

Abstract

“19/87” and “Laitlum,” the fictional works of Janice Pariat, a Khasi writer from North-East India, offer insights into the complex issues of identity formation and the politics of belonging and unbelonging in the region. North-East India, with its diverse ethnic and linguistic groups, can be viewed as a microcosm of India itself. Yet, much of the immigration in this region occurred after the East India Company’s annexation of the area in 1826, leading to the exploitation of resources and subjugation of its people by colonial and postcolonial Indian governments, resulting in cultural imperialism and social trauma. This shifting notion of the insider-outsider dichotomy is not only a subject of political discourse but also a recurrent theme in the literature of the region. Pariat’s two short stories capture the recent political turmoil between the Khasis and non-Khasis (outsiders) in Shillong after the Independence. The author depicts the socio-cultural and economic realities of the Khasis and non-Khasis during and after the colonial era. By illustrating the possibility of authentic human connections across cultural and social boundaries, her works aim to dismantle the artificial construct of a pure Khasi identity.

Keywords: belonging, unbelonging, Khasi; *dkhar*, North-East India; outsider/within

Introduction

The region of North-East India is often characterised as a space where inter-ethnic conflict is endemic, as diverse ethnic groups seek to secure increased territorial autonomy or exercise their right to

* Ph.D. Research Fellow in the Department of English & Culture Studies at Mizoram University, Tanhril, India.

** Associate Professor in the Department of English & Culture Studies at Mizoram University, Tanhril, India.

self-determination. This dynamic is manifest in a range of movements, such as those advocating for Gorkhaland, Nagalim, Bodoland, Karbi Anglong, Tipraland, Garoland, and Kamtapur. While some of these struggles may be framed as “separatist movements,” others seek to establish autonomous councils or new states in order to achieve a higher degree of sub-national autonomy (Wenner 156). Within this context, insurgency and ethnic violence may be viewed as a means of articulating differences by communities that have been marginalised, as they utilise violent political tactics to confront the persistent discourse of subordination imposed by the dominant group. Meghalaya, one of the North-East states, has been relatively less turbulent compared to its neighbouring states that have grappled with multiple insurgent groups. However, ethnic conflicts between the indigenous tribal population and the non-tribal settler communities have persisted since its inception in 1972. Economic migration, particularly from Nepal, Bangladesh, and other parts of India, before and after the colonial era, has created a sense of unease among the locals, as these migrant communities dominate various economic sectors, including businesses, labour, and employment opportunities (Haokip 303). This has resulted in ethnic clashes between the indigenous tribals and migrant non-tribal communities in 1979, 1987, and 1992. During the 1980s ethnic riots, the Bengali, Nepali, Bihari, and Marwari communities were the main target, while in the 1990s the Bengali community suffered the most, resulting in an exodus of 25,000 to 35,000 individuals to other parts of India, especially West Bengal. The number of Bengalis in Meghalaya has significantly decreased from 8.13% of the population in 1981 to 5.97% in 1991, as documented by Phukan (99-100). Despite some improvement in ethnic relations between the tribals and non-tribals in the mid-1990s, there have been recurrent flare-ups of ethnic tensions that cannot be overlooked.

The intricate and unstable socio-political landscape of Meghalaya is deeply embedded within a complex network of cultural, historical, and economic narratives that shape the region’s identity. With the absence of a viable political resolution to the existing societal challenges, members of the intellectual elite, who have been directly affected by these issues, often use literary

endeavours to give voice to their experiences. Their literary works act as a bridge between the lack of effective representation and the rejection of political solutions. While North-East Indian literature has been critiqued for being conflict-ridden (Longkumer 2), a closer examination reveals that these writings, at some point, strive towards peace. Celebrated Khasi writer Janice Pariat's short story collection, *Boats on Land*, is one such work that depicts the socio-cultural and economic realities of the Khasis and non-Khasis during and after the colonial era. The selected stories for this study, "19/87" and "Laitlum," set in post-independent Shillong, capture the recent political unrest between the Khasis and non-Khasis (outsiders) with depth and sensitivity.

The Politics of (Un)Belonging and the Narrative Agency

As the title suggests, the story "19/87" is situated within a period of heightened unrest and inter-ethnic conflict in Meghalaya, brought about by several insurgent groups, including the Khasi Students Union and the Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council. The story traces the life of Banri, a young Khasi man who forms a friendship with Suleiman, a Muslim tailor and "dkhar", a Khasi term for "outsider" or "foreigner" to the tribal hills, despite their shared citizenship in India. The narrative foregrounds unconventional and alternative perspectives on notions of belonging and indigeneity within a specific locality, while also illuminating marginalised expressions of dissent against the idea of cultural purity. The dichotomy between tribal and non-tribal groups in the region of Meghalaya has been heavily politicised, resulting in the portrayal of non-tribal groups as outsiders who violate the rights of indigenous people, leading to recurring conflicts over several decades. The creation of new ethnolinguistic states has not fully resolved these tensions, as "non-ethnic polities" and "trans-ethnic clans" persist within these geopolitical zones (Ramirez 94-6). As Horowitz argues that ethnicity is often associated with "hostility towards outgroups" (7), this resulted in non-tribal groups being perceived as infiltrators, intensifying the persistent conflicts that have characterised the region. Zygmunt Bauman's concept of the stranger is applicable here, as it emphasises the profound threat that the stranger figure poses, surpassing that of an enemy. The social positioning of the

stranger makes a relationship with them almost impossible, as their unfamiliarity and perceived otherness challenge the foundations of social order and stability. The stranger stands between friend and foe, order and chaos, the inside and the outside (Bauman 61).

In “19/87,” Pariat employs the ambiguous situation, symbolised by the slash in the title, to investigate the potential for sociation with the stranger. The author seeks to challenge the common assumption that when a stranger enters a new social sphere, they must necessarily be viewed with suspicion or hostility. Instead, Pariat aims to encourage a more inclusive approach that recognises the value of engaging with the stranger rather than marginalising or excluding them. Mara Matta argues that Pariat’s intimate portrayal of the *dkhar*, Suleiman, seeks to disprove the notion that the outsider must be viewed as an enemy and instead explores the possibility of sociation with the outsider as a friend (52). Consequently, the story attempts to “deconstruct the artificial idea of a pure khasiness” (53) by demonstrating the potential for genuine human connection across cultural and social barriers. Pariat’s narrative about Suleiman is based on a true incident in which a Muslim tailor was caught in the crossfire between police and local militants in Shillong, Meghalaya. In 1987, the region witnessed a resurgence of violent uprisings targeting the *dkhar* community, involving arson and physical violence. Certain Khasi student groups and political figures were primarily responsible for leading the demonstrations, which culminated in the destruction of an entire neighbourhood. Suleiman, as a *dkhar*, is cognizant of the perilous circumstances unfolding in his community. He is mindful that his neighbours, including Usman and his family, have fled to safety due to the mounting dangers (Pariat 98). Suleiman also notices that the number of Muslim families in the area has dwindled owing to the persistent threats they face. Having resided in the area for two to three decades, Suleiman has no other place to go.

As the plot unfolds, the unexpected friendship between Suleiman and Banri reveals the intricate complexity of their lives and their relationship during the tumultuous times of the 1987 riots. Despite the stark differences in social positioning between Suleiman, a Muslim outsider and tailor, and Banri, a Khasi tribal

worker, their bond lays bare the fallacy of essentialist categorisations and the dangers of racial profiling. This narrative underscores the crucial role of relationality in shaping identity formation and illuminates the intricate interplay between individual agency and social structures in shaping inter-group dynamics. By rejecting reductive and homogenising categorisations, this account stresses the necessity of context-sensitive and nuanced approaches to community building and identity formation. Suleiman's persistent efforts to position himself within the boundaries of insiders, despite the strict limitations imposed by codified ethnic and religious norms, reflect his ardent pursuit of cultural adaptation and social acceptance. This pursuit necessitates a high level of cultural proficiency and strategic manipulation of established conventions. Suleiman's continuous renegotiation of the parameters of his existence highlights a nuanced and intricate identity that emerges from navigating the periphery of dominant societal norms while also participating in their conventions. His quest to navigate a space that carries a potential for violence necessitates a delicate balance between acceptance and detachment, which calls for the adoption of the "outsider/within" role as a mechanism of self-preservation. His proclivity for kite flying as a form of cultural capital serves as a clear manifestation of Pierre Bourdieu's conception of the role of cultural practices in shaping an individual's social standing. His resolute pursuit of proficiency in this cultural practice is indicative of his efforts to accumulate cultural capital, which can provide social benefits and grant entry to exclusive networks and resources that are otherwise inaccessible to marginalised individuals, "Kite warriors wage a faceless war. In the city, on rooftops and terraces and small open car parks, the enemy is hidden, concealed at the other hand of the string, probing the sky with slim, curving weapons." (Pariat 66). His adoption of the "outsider/within" role and his quest for cultural capital expose the intricacies of identity formation in hierarchically organised societies, highlighting the impact of cultural practices on an individual's social placement. His kite flying mastery pursuit signifies his desire for social inclusion and mobility, offering a profound inquiry into the interplay among cultural practices, social identity, and power dynamics in society. Constrained as a subaltern lacking agency and voice, Suleiman navigates obscure paths to

survive, avoiding contact with Khasis, who enforce strict social separation (Matta 56). Insider norms regulate social interaction, with violations and failures to conform to outsider identity performance resulting in serious consequences. An example is Suleiman's attraction to Christine, a Khasi neighbour girl who occasionally flirts with him, as described by Pariat, "He'd be accused of stealing Khasi women away from their men. And who knew what might happen then? At the moment, it was manageable, leaving his house only if he had to, stocking up on food for weeks at a stretch." (Pariat 68-69). In the North-East context, minority groups that are not believed to pose an actual threat to the dominant majority are often considered obstacles to the promotion of sub-national ethnos and cultural purity. They are perceived as an extra presence that does not fit into the cultural imagination of a homogeneous group that upholds a specific set of majoritarian ideas and cultural values. Arjun Appadurai describes this growing hostility towards minority others as a "narcissistic process" in nationalism, in which majorities believe they are at risk of becoming minor and fear that minorities could become the dominant force. This process leads to the formation of predatory identities that require the extinction of another collectivity for their survival (Appadurai 51).

To discuss the "fear of small numbers" is to engage in a discourse of exclusion that seeks to maintain the cultural purity and exclusivity of the dominant majority. This fear, as described by Appadurai, is based on the idea that the mere presence of a minority other poses a threat to the majority's identity. In "19/87," this fear is evident in the treatment of Suleiman, whose attempts to navigate ethnic and religious boundaries are met with suspicion and accusations of impurity. Suleiman's very existence serves as a reminder of the dominant group's identity's fragility, resulting in his constant marginalisation and scrutiny. In contemporary sociopolitical contexts, there is a rise in predatory identities that idealise majoritarianism and ethnic purity, leading to the rejection of even the smallest minority groups within national borders (Appadurai 53). This tendency towards a unified ethnic identity is performative rather than purely ideological, as it enforces a dominant cultural imposition that effaces the diversity of voices and

identities present within a society. In the diverse and complex space of Shillong, the capital city of Meghalaya, migrant settlers from various cultural, ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds constitute a minority. They are broadly categorised into non-tribals, known as “dkhar”, and non-native tribal communities. However, an “us” versus “them” mentality pervades the inter-group relations, reflecting the asymmetrical power dynamics within the discursive field of the city. Indigenous tribals seek to promote a 'sons of the soil' policy that excludes and marginalises non-tribal settlers based on a myth of originary purity. The 2011 census data indicates a decline in the proportion of non-tribals in the population of Meghalaya, due to out-migration. However, this statistical observation runs counter to the perception among indigenous tribes, fueled by political parties and pressure groups, of an influx of outsiders. This perception underscores the insider-outsider tensions that characterise the politics of belonging and exclusion in a multicultural society. The ambivalent positionality of migrant settlers in Shillong’s cultural space reflects this tension between the desire for assimilation and the need for differentiation.

In another story, "Laitlum", Pariat illustrates the Khasi people’s struggle to preserve their cultural identity and territorial integrity. The title itself signifies the Khasi people’s strong desire to protect their ethnicity and land, with Laitlum symbolising the ancestral homeland of the Khasi people. The Khasi people’s culture, identity, and history are deeply embedded in their land, rendering it an inextricable component of their being. This attachment to the land is exploited by politicians and communal groups to foment the younger generation's hatred against all immigrant intruders, eventually leading to interethnic conflict. While outsiders faced minimal resistance during the British administration, the Khasi people presently resist their presence, considering it a violation of their territorial sovereignty. The exact cause of the unrest in Shillong during the late 1980s remains undisclosed by Pariat, but the story reveals it gradually. The setting of the story “Laitlum” is the vibrant city of Shillong in Meghalaya. Unlike the typical conflicts between insurgents and state forces, this narrative centres on the tensions between the Khasi people and the *dkhars*. This is why, Anku, an Assamese boy, who forms a close relationship with

the narrator, experiences apprehension about departing from Shillong:

‘But why?’ I cried. . .

‘It’s my mother. . .

‘She says she’s had enough, that she wants to be with her own people. She said to abba it was either her or Shillong.’ (Pariat 132)

The bond between Anku and the narrator is deeply intertwined with the former’s fondness for Shillong, his place of origin. Anku is distressed by the notion of leaving Shillong, as he harbours a profound attachment to the place. Nevertheless, the concept of departing from Shillong has been instilled in the younger generation by their forebears, and Anku’s father also grapples with this predicament before eventually departing. Whereas the preceding generation viewed Shillong as a land of opportunities, the succeeding generation views it as their birthplace. This establishes an intense and unshakeable connection between the land and its inhabitants, as evidenced by Anku’s father’s and Chris and Melvin’s family’s emotional attachment to Shillong. Furthermore, their reverence for Khasi customs is evident in their adherence to traditional Khasi funeral rituals following their grandmother’s demise, “True to Khasi tradition, one they’d adopted as part of having lived in Shillong for many generations, the family gathered to ‘said jain’, to wash household clothes at Dwar Ksuid.” (Pariat 140). Set in the early 1990s, a period marked by political violence and curfews, the story depicts the life of an unnamed young girl who narrates her experiences, including her friendship with Anku, a spirited Assamese boy living nearby, and her rebellious and pampered sister Grace’s romance with Chris, a Chinese boy. All these characters share a common aspiration for freedom from the constraints of their surroundings, leading them to undertake a journey to Laitlum, a secluded hilltop situated an hour away from the turmoil of Shillong. For them, Laitlum serves as a haven of tranquillity and respite from the unrest and chaos of Shillong:

‘Why is this place called Laitlum?’ asked Melvin suddenly.

‘It means where the hills are set free,’ answered Grace. . .
‘When you’re sitting here,’ said Chris finally, ‘all the shit in life seems far away.’ (Pariat 138-9)

The characters in the story perceive Laitlum as a potent symbol of their quest for liberty and placidity, serving as a means of escape from the tempestuous and troubled milieu, as well as the pervasive grip of biases and hostility pervading the urban environment they inhabit. Nonetheless, their idyllic refuge is ephemeral, as a tragic event transpires when both Chris and Melvin perish by drowning in a river a few months later. Ultimately, Anku and his family vacate Shillong and move to Dibrugarh, Assam, to evade the escalating conflict, a decision mirrored by Chris and Melvin’s parents, who also leave the city due to the intensifying extortion demands imposed by militant factions in the state.

In the context of Meghalaya, the non-tribal community or dkhars, continue to face difficulties in establishing a sense of belonging within the tribal community, despite their prolonged residence. This can be attributed to the fact that the tribal population’s identity is intimately connected with the land, endowing them with an inherent sense of attachment and belonging. However, the first generation of immigrants view the land as “a land of opportunity” that provides material and economic benefits rather than an emotional connection (Biswas & Das 74). As a result, their relationship with the land differs significantly from that of subsequent generations. The non-tribal community, displaced from their ancestral lands, has sought refuge in the territory of the Khasi people, where they are compelled to coexist with a community whose identity is intricately linked to the land. The politics of nationalism propagated by the tribal community remain a source of estrangement for the dhar community, as they are unable to assert a shared affinity with the land. Nonetheless, both communities share an emotional attachment to the land, albeit with subtle nuances (Biswas & Das 75). While the Khasis may not experience an identity crisis within their homeland, the non-tribals are in a perpetual state of grappling with their sense of belonging, as exemplified in Pariat’s fictional characters like Suleiman. The

acceptance and rejection, love and hatred, friendship and animosity they encounter from the tribal community further compound this struggle. This situation is evident in the everyday existence of Suleiman, who encounters persistent expressions of antipathy and hostility from the locals. Top of Form, “Often at night, though, there were stones thrown on his roof, shouts resounding in the street—*Dkhar liah, mih na Shillong.*’ You bastard outsider, get out of Shillong. These were the things, thought Suleiman, that weren’t reported in newspapers.” (Pariat 101). This has led Suleiman estranged from the land he previously considered his own as a result of the exclusionary practices he has encountered from the tribal population. This has led to feelings of detachment and isolation, engendering a profound sense of unbelongingness. The symbolic title of the story, “19/87”, denotes a disjuncture between past and present, serving as a metaphor for the displacement and alienation that permeate the narrative. The numbers “19” and “87” represent a significant divide that separates Suleiman’s current predicament from his roots. However, Suleiman’s root is not solely an external entity; instead, it is intimately connected to his sense of self, as he regards the land of Shillong as an inherent component of his identity. Regrettably, Suleiman’s affiliation with his surroundings has been corroded by cultural stereotypes and animosity, resulting in sentiments of estrangement and dissatisfaction. This experience reflects the wider predicament of marginalised individuals, who must navigate complex issues of identity and belonging in the face of social exclusion and discrimination.

The examination of the notion of self within the Khasi community reveals that their conception of identity plays a critical role in maintaining their distinction from non-indigenous communities. The boundaries enforced between these groups are representative of a power dynamic that affords the Khasi people an opportunity to establish dominance over minority non-indigenous groups. Furthermore, cultural stereotypes are employed as a means of perpetuating this dynamic, which are often based on ethnocentric prejudices. As Lehtonen suggests, such cultural stereotypes used in intercultural settings frequently reveal indications of ethnocentrism:

Cultural stereotypes, such as comparisons between us and other, are also intertwined with the concept of ethnocentricity. In cultural stereotypes, the 'other' is usually valued negatively in comparison with "us" and our culture, which we see as 'normal', 'natural', and 'correct', and the customs and the ethical values which we feel are universally valid. (62)

Inter-group comparisons within intercultural contexts can reveal the cultural stereotypes that are employed to reinforce asymmetrical relations. In the case of the Khasi community in Meghalaya, such stereotypes have significant effects not only on their social interactions but also on their broader relationships. It is within this context of cultural difference and power dynamics that one must understand the Khasi community's self-ascription and group membership. For the Khasis, ethnic identity serves as a marker that reinforces their differentiation from non-indigenous counterparts, reflecting the underlying power dynamics that shape intercultural relations rather than being a mere matter of social distinction. The characters of Suleiman, Chris, and Melvin share a profound attachment to Shillong, a place that they have come to regard as their "home" and their "belonging". However, their sense of belonging is challenged by the inter-group conflict and cultural stereotyping that they encounter, which often escalate into violent outbursts. As a result, these characters are deprived of the foundational prerequisites for the development of a sense of belonging. They are driven by an innate desire to locate a means of feeling that they belong to a larger entity, be it a state, territory, culture, or group. For instance, Chris's attraction to Laitlum and his family's execution of traditional Khasi funeral rites can be construed as an instance of this quest for belongingness. The yearning for Laitlum by Chris and Melvin and the pursuit of friendship by Suleiman can be read as an allegory for the quest for home in a world marked by detachment and dislocation. The conditions that give rise to this pursuit of belongingness are rooted in the sensation of "unhomeliness," a term that Homi K. Bhabha derives from Freud's "Unheimlich" or "Uncanny". According to Bhabha, the "unhomely" state is not merely a state of being deprived of a home or experiencing homelessness. Instead, it is a

state in which the boundaries between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the intimate and the alien, have been blurred. It is a condition in which the notion of home has been destabilised and brought into question, propelling characters like Suleiman, Chris, and Melvin to engage in an incessant search for something that can furnish them with a sense of belonging.

The quest for friendship can be interpreted as a means of fostering a sense of home by establishing deep and significant interpersonal relationships. Similarly, the yearning for Laitlum can be perceived as an effort to reclaim a sense of rootedness to a place, counterbalancing the pervasive sense of disconnection that characterises the postmodern era. Bhabha wrote, "In that displacement the border between home and world becomes confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting." (141). Amid inter-ethnic conflict and cultural stereotypes, the sensation of being unhomed emerges as a disorienting experience that erodes one's sense of belonging. The loss of a once-familiar home engenders feelings of alienation, frustration, and separation, leading to a fragmented sense of self and a destabilised relationship with place and identity. This quest for a stable sense of belonging is an allegorical pursuit of an ideological construct, emblematic of security, comfort, and familiarity. In the postcolonial context, identity formation involves a fusion of the familiar and the unfamiliar as individuals negotiate an uncertain and disorienting terrain. According to Bhabha's application of Freud's concept of the Uncanny, the separation between the conscious and subconscious leads to an unsettling experience where the familiar becomes strange. In this way, the intrusion of the outside world into the home destabilises the once-stable identity, causing the homely space to become unhomely.

Conclusion

Janice Pariat's stories, thus, offer a nuanced and insightful examination of the intricate and multifaceted issues that underlie the politics of belonging and unbelonging in the context of Meghalaya. Her work underscores the potential for cultural hybridity and negotiation to foster pathways towards reconciliation and

comprehension, even in the face of deeply rooted differences. Ultimately, Pariat's writing serves as a powerful reminder of the enduring possibility of connection and community, provided we approach cultural differences with an attitude of empathy and openness.

Works Cited

- Appadurai, Arjun. *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger*. Duke UP, 2006.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. *Modernity and Ambivalence*. Cornell UP, 1991.
- Bhabha, Homi K. "The World and the Home." *Social Text*, vol. 31, no. 32, 1992, pp. 141-153.
- Biswas, Debajyoti, and Rupanjit Das. "The Construction of Insider-Outsider in Anglophone Writings from Northeast India." *RUDN Journal of Studies in Literature and Journalism*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2021, pp. 71-78.
- Horowitz, Donald L. *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*. University of California Press, 1985.
- Haokip, Thongkhohal. "Inter-ethnic relations in Meghalaya." *Asian Ethnicity*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2014, pp.302-316. Lehtonen, J. "Stereotypes and collective identification." *Cultural Identity in an Intercultural Context*, edited by D. Petkova and J. Lehtonen, University of Jyväskylä, 2005, pp. 61-85.
- Longkumer, Watitula I. "Reading Terror in Literature: Exploring Insurgency in Nagaland through Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*." *Sanglap*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2014, pp. 115-128.
- Matta, Mara. "The Khasi New Wave. Addressing Indigenous Issues from a Literary and Cinematic Perspective." *Anglistica AION*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2015, pp. 51-67.
- Phukan, Mridula Dhekial. "Ethnicity, Conflict and Population Displacement in Northeast India." *Asian Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2013, pp. 91-101.
- Pariat, Janice. *Boats on Land: A Collection of Short Stories*. Random House India, 2012.
- Ramirez, Philippe. "Belonging to the Borders Uncertain Identities in Northeast India." *The Politics of Belonging in the Himalayas: Local Attachments and Boundary Dynamics. Governance, Conflict, and Civic Action*, edited by Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka and Gérard Toffin. SAGE Publications, 2011, pp. 77-97.
- Wenner, Miriam. "Ethno-Regionalism." *The Routledge Companion to Northeast India*, edited by Jelle J.P. Wouters and Tanka B. Subba, Routledge, 2023, pp. 156-161.



Understanding the Dalit Hero/Anti-hero: A Comparative Analysis of Manu Joseph's *Serious Men* and Ajay Navaria's "Scream"

Maitrayee Sarma *

Abstract

Through a comparative study of two texts, this paper seeks to analyse the significance of a Dalit anti-hero as a protagonist in contemporary Indian English fiction. Besides an in-depth study of the two texts, the paper will also look at the larger question of defining an anti-hero, as well as the development of the concept of hero and anti-hero in literary fiction from India, and try to uncover any deviations from Western models, if any.

Keywords: Indian writing in English, Dalit literature, modernism, anti-caste

Hero/Anti-Hero: Contexts and Conditions

The figure of the hero in Western literature is one of its most discernible features. The narrative function of the figure of a tragic hero was explored in great detail by Aristotle in his seminal text *Poetics*, which was also one of the oldest works of literary criticism, and the model that he described became a mould for building characters in Western literature for several centuries. However, there was a conscious effort to break away from the standards of heroism set by classical literature, and simultaneously develop a new, more relevant kind of character that would come to be known as the "anti-hero" that stands in opposition to the "hero" in many ways but still performs similar narrative functions. Unlike the hero, the anti-hero does not come from a privileged background and neither is he viewed as a symbol of moral values that bind the social fabric of his community. Despite that, the anti-hero manages to inspire pathos in its readers, a quality that Aristotle deemed crucial to the

* Research Scholar, Department of English, Gauhati University.

characterisation of the hero and has emerged as a vehicle for the elaboration of the many anxieties of modern life.

The history of the anti-hero is multitudinous. In different texts, the anti-hero takes different forms, but its most defining characteristic is the criticism of traditional heroic values that is intrinsic to it. In *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, Northrop Frye describes what he calls the hero of “low mimetic mode” that has several similarities with the conceptualisation of the “anti-hero”. Frye describes this character as:

...superior neither to other men nor to his environment, the hero is one of us: we respond to a sense of his common humanity and demand from the poet the same canons of probability that we find in our own experience. This gives us the hero of the low mimetic mode of most comedy and realistic fiction. (34)

Frye traces the emergence of this character type in the sentimental fiction of Daniel Defoe, who wrote several novels where the protagonists came from the lowest rungs of English society and whose struggles captured the realities of living in eighteenth-century England and the means to survive such realities. Like Frye’s hero of the “low mimetic mode”, George Steiner, in his book *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky: An Essay in the Old Criticism*, analyses the figure of the “underground hero” in the works of the two canonical Russian authors, especially in the writings of Dostoevsky and the morally dubious actions of his protagonists. Steiner locates the emergence of this hero in what he calls the “anti-heroic” philosophy espoused by Denis Diderot in *Rameau’s Nephew* (1714), which was later also referenced by Hegel in his criticism of the Enlightenment in *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Patterson, in her essay *Imagining Anti-Administration’s Anti-Hero (Antagonist? Protagonist? Agonist?)*, has suggested that the origin of the anti-hero protagonist can be traced even further back, most notably in the figure of the trickster in medieval literature. She writes, “trickster is a 'shape shifter' who alters and disguises himself to enter forbidden spaces and signify impermanence; ... At the same time, however, trickster has an anti-

fascist energy; by pure contrariety, s/he articulates the limits of discipline.” (532)

The anti-hero, as I am going to analyse it in this paper, as a figure in Indian writing bears much resemblance to this characterisation as a trickster. It must be noted that even though the origin of the anti-hero is not concrete, its emergence seems to be diffused throughout literary history. It is only in the modernist writings of the early twentieth century that the anti-hero emerged as not only a possible alternative for the traditional hero but as the defining model of characterisation that could accurately represent the essence of the fragmented reality of contemporary times. All traditional models of heroism were interrogated under the shadow of World War I, and the West woke up to the possibility that what it had enshrined as honourable and heroic comes at insurmountable costs and must either be discarded or reinterrogated. Shadi Neimneh, in his essay *The Anti-Hero in Modernist Fiction: From Irony to Cultural Renewal* describes this development as “Existential alienation and angst made modernist writers represent social misfits, brooding men, and suffering victims of incomprehensible forces in a hostile world since man felt lost and despairing.” (77). The idea of one man with the capability to single-handedly change the course of history was gradually disregarded, and what emerged in its stead was a new kind of “anti-hero” which is defined by passivity and failure but somehow still manages to redeem himself in the eyes of the reader with an almost comical likeability. Eliot's Prufrock and Joyce's Leopold Bloom are important examples of this new kind of character study in literature.

Defining an Indian Hero/Anti-Hero

Indian writing in English did not have a conscious break from the heroic mould like Western literature did, its journey being governed by different concerns. Classical Indian mythology and literature have an abundance of heroic figures, who fit Aristotle's definition of the tragic hero, figures like Arjuna and Rama, who were of high birth, gallant and brave and whose fates changed the course of history itself. But Indian writing in English, as it matured in the early twentieth century, had already abandoned the idea of a heroic protagonist that

the West had held on to up till that point. Under the shadow of colonialism, early Indian English fiction had a clear nationalist and nation-building agenda that did not have much room for experimenting that was being done by the modernist writers in the West around the same time. The widespread use of social realism as a mode of representation meant that Indian writing in English did not indulge in making heroes and was involved instead in representing settings and situations that conveyed Indianness as well as an anti-colonial spirit. Mulk Raj Anand's 1935 novel *Untouchable*, for instance, told the story of the young Dalit boy Bakha and his experience of casteism and the many ways in which it affected him until he found solace in the words of Gandhi. The text is dedicated completely to Bakha's perspective, and the reader is bound to feel impacted by his experiences of injustice, even though the story establishes clearly that Bakha's personal fate will not have any impact on the fate of the nation. Bakha's life is used as a representative model of what could be done to help emancipate large sections of the population, thereby putting the focus on community building instead of individual development.

One of the many ways in which Anand's novel left a lasting impact on Indian English writing was its portrayal of the Dalit experience. The text never uses the term "Dalit" or makes any reference to the Ambedkarite movement that was underway at the time it was written in 1935, finding its resolution in homogenous ideas of Gandhian reformism instead. Even though the novel left much to be desired in terms of its anti-caste politics, what it managed to establish was the importance of understanding caste and its role in shaping the future of Indian society. Indian English fiction, in its early stages, was absorbed in imagining a future for the nation, a future that was anti-colonial, secular and modern. In interrogating Indian modernity, Dalit identity raises several important questions to counter the narratives that were being built in the twentieth century, the most crucial of which is the legitimacy of this so-called modernity itself which has allowed feudal structures like caste to exist. Dalit characters in contemporary Indian English fiction have very little in common with Anand's Bakha. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, Indian fiction has been involved in exploring the different ways in which globalisation and the liberalisation of the Indian

economy have transformed life in the country. As the rich-poor divide broadened, the experiences of Dalit characters emerged as key leitmotifs in understanding what this new progress and development of the Indian state actually looked like. Aravind Adiga's Booker Prize winning novel *The White Tiger* (2008) set the precedent for a new kind of modern hero with its protagonist Balram Halwai. Although not explicitly anti-caste, Balram clearly identifies his caste identity as a thorn on his way to success, which he defines in purely economic terms, and also reveals in his humorous tone the upper caste-upper class hegemonic control over resources, the one that he tried breaking through in the course of the novel. In her essay titled *Fables of the Tiger Economy: Species and Subalternity in Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger*, Sundhya Walther provides an apt description of what Balram Halwai signifies in the following way and this new way of imagining subalternity, "For all the uniqueness of his voice, Balram is not a real subaltern at all: he is, in fact, an animal figure, an embodiment of the predatory power of contemporary Indian and global capitalism." (579).

Like Anand, Adiga's engagement with anti-caste politics was far from adequate and mostly woven into the narrative through Balram's hilarious quips and problematic comments. The reason why Adiga and other contemporaries use humour and shock as tools for engaging with anti-caste politics seems to be their own upper caste-upper class positions, which allows them the distance to mock and satirise without critical engagement. The model of characterisation set by the likes of Adiga did not hearken towards any social reform politics like in Anand's novel and instead conveyed a cynicism and misanthropy that was unmindful of the importance of community building and held material success as the only measure of success. It must be said that cynicism and misanthropy are qualities that the anti-hero of modernist fiction in the West often displayed, Joyce's Leopold Bloom being an early example of it. But in the Indian context, is this cynicism an accurate portrayal of the Dalit experience, and by extension, of Indian modernity? Or does the Dalit anti-hero created by a Dalit writer provide any different insights? In the following sections, I am going to try to inspect these questions through a comparative study of Manu Joseph's novel *Serious Men* (2010) and Ajay Navaria's story "Scream" (2013), which was translated from

Hindi by Laura Brueck. As already discussed, the circumstances of the anti-hero are far from heroic, so while Ayyan Mani of Joseph's novel is a peon, Ajay Navaria's unnamed protagonist in *Scream* is a male prostitute. What binds them together is not just a spirit of anti-Brahminism but also a desire for revenge, which leads them to dabble in crime and questionable morality in general, although they take different routes in exacting this revenge.

A Comparative Analysis of *Serious Men* and *Scream*

In *Serious Men*, Joseph uses the form of satire to a point where all criticisms become indistinguishable from each other, echoing in many ways the words of Balram Halwai in Adiga's novel. The dominant voice is of Ayyan, whose vindictive nature is established right at the outset of the novel. The novel begins with a look inside Ayyan's hypersexual gaze as he watches rich women going on their evening walks on the Worli Seaface. Joseph writes: "Their tired high caste faces, so fair and glistening with sweat, bore the grimace of exercise. He imagined they were all in the ecstasy of being seduced by him." (6).

Ayyan works as a peon at the Institute of Theory and Research, and even though his coworkers seem unaware of it, the reader is repeatedly made aware of his disdain for his upper-caste bosses, revealed through his humorous narration. Even before his dubious scheme of "War of Brahmins" is revealed, the reader finds him constantly plotting, spying and eavesdropping on his bosses, revealing his trickster nature, which through Joseph's use of dark humour, is extremely entertaining. Joseph is not the only upper-caste writer, Aravind Adiga is another notable name who has been subjected to criticism for his formulaic use of Dalitism, for ignoring the structural inequalities and highlighting the "shock value" of such stories, reducing them to pulp-fictionalised revenge thrillers, catering mostly to Western audiences and their conceptions of Indian subalternity. It is this "shock value" that ultimately Ayyan hopes to manipulate for his use when he chooses to create a media frenzy by leaking footage of senior scientists at the institute speaking in casteist slurs. Joseph's conception of Mani's psyche is revealed through the kind of imagery that he uses, for example:

The cars, their faces frowning in a superior way through the bonnet grilles, were the Brahmins. They were higher than the motorcycles, who were higher than the pedestrians. The cycles were the lowest of the low. Even the pedestrians pretended that they didn't see them. The bus had to be something in this structure, and Ayyan decided that this was him. Lowly, but formidable and beyond torment. (81)

Although to give Joseph due credit, such an oversimplified representation of social structures was a part of his project of mocking “seriousness”, which he established in the very beginning when he writes: “If you stare long enough at serious people they will begin to appear comical” (4). The result is an intriguing plot with almost no enduring takeaways. One of the main reasons why I think the narrative fails in representing the Dalit experience is the use of the third-person omniscient narrator that is effective in communicating satire but fails to invoke empathy. However, as a non-Dalit it might seem that Joseph made the right choice in establishing his distance. In contrast, Ajay Navaria’s “Scream” reads almost like an autobiographical account than a short story. The opening scene almost mirrors Mani’s sexual fantasy as we find the narrator in the throes of passion with a woman with a distinct upper-caste surname. He even echoes the violence laced in Mani’s vision. Navaria writes: “I wanted suddenly to give her a powerful kick, but instead I only prodded her lightly with my foot.” (93).

It is only halfway through the story that we realise that the apparent moment of passion for Navaria’s unnamed protagonist was more of an economic transaction, part of his job as a male prostitute. As we progress with his tale, it becomes abundantly clear that the more accurate parallel would be the “lustful hatred” which the protagonist of “Scream” notes in the sexualised gaze of the upper caste girl who ogles him rather than Mani’s hypersexualised gaze. Moreover, the sexual fantasy of the opening paragraph also comes with a memory of a warning from the protagonist’s father, which says: “Crime is very seductive. And revenge is a trickster.” 93). While Mani concocts his plan around debunking the upper caste assertion of meritocracy, Navaria’s hero translates his Dalit body from a site of oppression to one of perverse pleasure for the upper

caste. They both take up a criminal route and relish the power that they enjoy, albeit. Navaria writes: “No one eats poison because they are hungry. But I had begun to understand indisputably that the road to power was not straight. It is winding, rugged, and full of ravines. I had to conquer it by my own firm resolve.” (104). It is this consciousness which is glaringly absent in Joseph's book. There is no development as to why and how Mani ended up concocting his plan of using his son to exact revenge on his bosses besides an oblique reference to him being a member of MENSA and thus being of superior intelligence and merit, and eligible to replace any member of the research institute that he ends up serving because of his caste. Moreover, Mani carries no sense of community affiliation, looking down on the other Dalits whom he does not consider his equal. He uses Dalit politicians to add to the media frenzy, and there is a mutual understanding between the two parties that it is ultimately a mutually beneficial agreement.

Instead of satire, “Scream” uses the form of autobiographical writing, which has been crucial to the formation of Dalit literature from the very beginning, and which creates for the reader to develop empathy for the character instead of just revelling in the plot. In order to pay for his studies, he accepts work in a massage parlour, tapping into the “lustful hatred” that the upper caste feels towards his own kind. He thereby shows complicity with a specifically colonial form of desire toward the racialised Other. As the narrator himself understands, “the beauty they [my parents] had both endowed me with was ugliness and that ugliness was both my beauty and my strength. Ugliness too is beauty; I had seen such a transformation. Differently beautiful” (Navaria 97). This realisation is especially liberating for the character because of his childhood experience of sexual violence. More than accepting his body, his work as a prostitute also allows him to appreciate the value of labour and skill in a capitalist system, which is liberating for him initially, but soon turns into an entrapment when he falls in love with one of his clients and still has to serve the other. Both of these are sexually unfulfilled women that he manipulates in many ways without repentance. In fact, he says: “I didn’t think of this as sin, though not because I questioned the idea of sin. In truth, virtue had died for me, or it had irrevocably

changed. This is why repentance never entered my vocabulary.” (Navaria 111).

The vocabulary of repentance is completely absent in Mani, who is defined by ruthlessness that he carries with himself till the end. Nevertheless, it raises a very important question “the largely destructive, destabilising forces of global capital can also prepare the ground for forms of collective resistance based on the newfound labour value of Dalits.” In *Serious Men*, the character that truly invokes some kind of sympathy of any kind is, in fact, his Savarna boss, Acharya, who, with a series of bad decisions, even manages to invoke Mani's sympathy, and acts as his ally and protects him. Acharya, in spite of his caste status, is always held in high regard by Ayyan because of his good treatment of him and consciousness about his caste status. Again, the structural inequality is treated at a personal level with a logic that reminds us that not all upper castes men are bad, and thereby devalues the angst of the Dalit individual. It has already been mentioned that Joseph does not allow his protagonist to have any community supporting him and in fact, ridicules the very notion of a Dalit community through the characters of the corrupt politician Waman and the rioters who show up at the Institute. The only character with whom he displays real camaraderie is, in fact, Acharya. While Mani emerges as an individualist trailblazer, Navaria's hero is constantly seeing parts of himself in others in equally oppressed positions, which he traces with the idea of the “scream”, which in different times represents sexual violence, sexual ecstasy and even a latent desire to get out of the circumstances of one's life. Noting a conversation with the bar dancers whom he lived with, Navaria's protagonist says: “Behind Sharda's, Padmini's and Revati's smiles and heavily made up faces was a stifled shriek I was only just beginning to hear. It was just like someone who tries to scream while she is being strangled” (100). It is in this stifled scream that he locates a sense of camaraderie, a kind of subaltern consciousness, united in the face of the forces that drives the modern metropolitan and which pushes its inhabitants to adopt skewed moral codes. As Giffard- Foret writes, “Navaria heralds the crisis of identity that befalls middle-class Dalits who have achieved a relative level of professional and material status in the modern Indian city.” (7).

One way in which this complexity is established is by tracing a movement from the rural to the urban spaces, tracing their journey from nameless proletariats to aspiring capitalists. This also highlights the ethical and moral stakes of every decision, which are echoed in the voice of his father that he constantly keeps hearing. In contrast, Joseph tells us very little about his hero's past circumstances and experiences. The emphasis is on him being an outlier, an exception, a fact which is recognised by the other Dalit characters who appear at the scene of the riot. The manifestation of the riot in itself is curious and happens almost comically. Kanak Yadav, in her essay “‘Another high-caste woman beyond his reach’: Cast(e)ing the sexual politics of Manu Joseph’s *Serious Men*” describes it in the following way, “By neither holding Ayyan Mani responsible for his conduct nor providing a glimpse of progressive politics, Joseph's novel does not suggest any enabling alternative for the reader.” (318). By extension, one might even say that Joseph fails to differentiate between resistance and revenge. Even though both characters are morally dubious, the fact that Navaria does not allow his hero's revenge to succeed is an important reminder of the need for organised effort, hearkening back to the starting point of the story that establishes revenge as a “trickster.” Ayyan Mani's revenge, in contrast, goes almost unchecked, and by establishing his son as his accomplice Joseph traces a persistence in this spirit, which is detrimental to the Dalit cause. One way in which Joseph can be defended is by noting that he did not intend *Serious Men* to be analysed as a work that deals with Dalit emancipation but as an Indian English novel that could perhaps represent a different side of the realities of the Indian nation-state for the caste-blind upper classes, and also perhaps to the Western audiences. However, as a Dalit scholar writing in Hindi, Navaria's position is very different, and his engagement with Dalit politics is thus more evident. However, no matter one's political affiliation, the power of representation cannot be ignored, and thus non-Dalit writers must be held accountable for their representations.

Conclusion

In 2020, *Serious Men* was adapted into a film by the same name with a screenplay written by Manu Joseph, and released worldwide on a popular streaming site Netflix. A year later, on the same streaming

site, a cinematic adaptation of *The White Tiger* was released with a star-studded cast. These adaptations show that there is a demand for anti-hero, trickster, stories in popular culture; people identify with these characters and they reflect an interesting side of the reality of India. But their reckless use of anti-caste politics, as discussed earlier, ultimately makes these stories formulaic and forgettable. As briefly discussed earlier, they paint a picture of Indian subalternity that is homogenous and where caste is a symptom of a problem and not a source of the problem itself. These anti-heroes, with their hypersexual gaze and their dubious morality, represent a cynical worldview where the world is corrupt and the one thing worth fighting for is money. “Scream,” on the other hand, creates room for community engagement and provides a slight glimpse of progressive politics. Dalit literature is always inevitably read as an extension of Dalit politics and is more conscious of its role in social critique and reform, unlike Indian English fiction which is not bound to any political commitments, as witnessed in Joseph's writing. The violent sexual undertones in both texts are also a reminder of gendered heroism, its conception and how it gets deconstructed through anti-hero characters—the way they view sex and women becoming a reflection of their immorality. The emasculation of the anti-hero, however, has the potential of decontextualising the problem of sexual violence and projecting it as an unintended consequence of the general corruption and immorality of the world, as evidenced by the lack of any female agency in both these texts. Gender, besides caste, is an important intersection to understanding Indian subalternity, and thus needs to be adequately addressed.

Works Cited

- Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton UP, 1957.
- Giffard-Foret, Paul. “(Re)casting Caste: Dalit Literary Consciousness in Ajay Navaria’s *Unclaimed Terrain* and Goyu Shyamala’s *Father may be an elephant and mother only a small basket but...*.” *Postcolonial Text*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2016, pp. 1-18.
- Joseph, Manu. *Serious Men*. Harper Collins, 2010.
- Navaria, Ajay. *Unclaimed Terrain*. Translated by Laura Brueck, Giramodo Publishing, 2015.
- Neimneh, Shadi. “The Anti-Hero in Modernist Fiction: From Irony to Cultural Renewal.” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, vol. 46, no. 4, 2013, pp. 75-90.

- Patterson, Patricia M. "Imagining Anti-Administration's Anti-Hero (Antagonist? Protagonist? Agonist?)." *Administrative Theory & Praxis*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2001, pp. 529-540.
- Walther, Sundhya. "Fables of the Tiger Economy: Species and Subalternity in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*." *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 60, no. 3, 2014, pp. 579-588.
- Yadav, Kanak. "'Another high-caste woman beyond his reach': Cast(e)ing the sexual politics of Manu Joseph's *Serious Men*". *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 57, no. 2, 2022, pp. 304–318.



**Food Politics and Culinary Capital: A Critical Reading
of Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* and Hansda
Sowvendra Shekhar's "They Eat Meat"**

Saru Sachdeva*, Rekha Rani**

Abstract

Food is an expression of social, communal and personal identity. Family, relationships and socio-cultural bonds are mediated through the making and sharing of food. Tribal communities, too, manifest power and hierarchies within the family, community and society at large through food as a central cultural motif/icon. When foodways and food habits are an individual's identity markers, the person/group/community undergoes a series of belongingness and unbelongingness/estrangement within the particular community and outside the community. The present paper tries to understand and critically analyse the gendered and communal politics of food culture and culinary capital as represented in Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* and Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's "They Eat Meat" from *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*. Engaging with food and culinary culture and their related dimensions, the paper deconstructs the numerous socio-cultural-political nuances attached to food culture and capital in the tribal and non-tribal world.

Keywords: Discrimination, food capital, food culture, foodways, gender identity, hierarchy, identity.

Introduction

Food is not rational. Food is culture, habit, craving and identity.

– *Jonathan Safran Foer*

* Research scholar, Department of Humanities, Deenbandhu Chhotu Ram University of Science & Technology, Murthal, Sonapat.

** Professor, Department of Humanities, Deenbandhu Chhotu Ram University of Science & Technology, Murthal, Sonapat.

Food is invariably a gateway to understanding a socio-culture dynamics of a community. "Food is a prism that absorbs and reflects a host of cultural phenomena" (Counihan 6) in the form of rites, rituals, beliefs, deities, festivities, tradition, history and communication. Food represents not only an individual's identity but also that of a community and society at large. Every household, community and class has its unique food culture, dishes, food preparation, ingredients, food-related rituals, food service/hospitality, food seasons, etc., which makes 'food' an important artefact in any culture. As Counihan states, food as an artefact "... occur in a wide range of peasant and tribal societies and are central to the maintenance of community and political organisations" (14); that is how "foodways influence the shaping of community, personality and family" (6). In the words of Freud, food is a crucial icon in becoming a part of the community by conforming to social norms and henceforth forming societies. Counihan emphasises, "[t]o eat and drink with someone was at the same time a symbol and a confirmation of social community and of the assumption of mutual obligations" (174). Every community-conscious group stresses the significance of the dishes, ingredients, the specific method to prepare food, the importance of food and food habits. Food becomes an entry point in understanding history, culture, and personal desires, at the level of the individual and the society at large. Food as a cultural artefact can be studied along the five basic elements of what Paul du Gay calls "the circuit of culture" (87). These elements include seeing representations, identity, production, consumption and regulation via food. Food is the focal point of any culture, helps in understanding socio-cultural and power dynamics, the identity of an individual and the community, the production, service and consumption of food, and many rites, rituals, and taboos concerning food and its preparation. If food is so significant in making and establishing a culture, then food helps establish and sustain the power structures as well. Food not only reveals the traditional identity of a person, but it also expresses the emotional attachment/value it holds for the one. This is how food mediates to construct and control the power dynamics in society: "Association between food and intra as well as inter-community relationships is often reflected in local and regional political nexus- food practices are used as symbols and used to compete for power"

(Mukhopadhyay 276). At the inter-community level, food is seen in how the minor community conforms to the food beliefs and practices of the dominant community. The domination of one community over another through food is visible in *Axone*, which projects the assumption of a few people from North India living in Delhi that northeastern food is against their religious beliefs. Students living in Delhi but belonging to North-East India want to cook Akhuni, their traditional food, on the occasion of the marriage of Mariam, their friend, but the people living in their neighbourhood do not let them cook their traditional food, mainly Akhuni. The tiff is visible. *Axone* or Akhuni is a traditional Naga food that is made during festivities. The cinematic narrative is about the struggle of these students to cook this dish. Since the cooking of Akhuni exudes a strong smell, the people around call them bad names both mentally and verbally. They are judged and threatened for the 'sin' they commit by cooking Akhuni, besides facing racist remarks about the food they cook and eat. This highlights how traditional or cultural food or food habits are used to map a person's acceptance and non-acceptance in a society.

At the inter-level, a dominant culture creates its own culinary capital in the form of food and imposes it on the tribal/marginal communities pushing them to the wall. At the intra-level, it is the tribal woman who becomes doubly marginalised from within and outside the community. A tribal woman is otherised by the dominant structure of the society on the basis of food and her kitchen domain. Virginia Woolf's remark in *A Room of One's Own* on writers who "... seldom spare a word for what was eaten" (12) in their writings and discussions and instead prefer to talk about the "very witty" things said during the luncheon parties (12), indicates the patriarchal politics of indifference, ignorance towards women on general and women writers in particular. Mention of soup and salmon means to go beyond what just appears on the plate. However, trivial and everyday thing like food begs discussion at the parties, where it becomes a marker of discrimination and association at the same time. Even Counihan reflects that "food is both a means of differentiation and a channel of connection" (12), not only in parties but in communities as well. On the one end, it can connect people, societies and cultures; on the other, it can be a marker of differentiation among diverse communities and sexes. Woolf is able to trace such

differentiation in the form of gender discrimination via food. She comments, "Here was my soup. It was a plain gravy soup" (20), which echoes how women have been given an inferior societal position that is mediated via food. "The transparent liquid" becomes a discourse that women are not only ill-fed but also pushed to the second position in society by serving less food or food that is not up to the mark (Woolf 22). Such discriminatory attitude towards women indicates their secondary status vis-à-vis men. Thus, food here is a marker and reminder of how a woman is "othered" in a community.

A metaphor of exploitation, food in the tribal communities, too, becomes a prop to suppress women. Food becomes a trope to express patriarchal power, woman subordination, and submissiveness. *A Terrible Matriarchy* by Easterine Kire talks about the Naga women's marginalisation and their secondary position in their society via food. In most Indian societies/communities, food and the kitchen are essential to and inseparable parts of a woman's life. Kitchen politics and food power are legitimised and valued in the Naga community. "Food and domestic spaces like the kitchen, therefore, are central to ascribing gender roles to women to maintain the patriarchal structure of their community" (Fauzi and Ahmad 112). Similarly, the women of the Naga community are pushed to the kitchen and hold the burden of exploitation and discrimination for eternity. The ideal place, i.e., the kitchen, and the ideal work, i.e. cooking, cleaning, etc., for a woman to fix her identity. She is constructed by the norms prevalent in the community, starting with food. Patriarchal control is reinstated via food politics, and the hierarchical relationship between a man and a woman stays rock solid.

Food and Identity Formation/ Identity Formation via Food

Narrated through Dielieno, a young girl, *A Terrible Matriarchy* threadbare the food politics and the power derived and exercised via food by both genders. The narrative opens with a scene where four-and-a-half-year-old Dielieno is sitting in the kitchen with her brother, and their grandmother¹ is serving them food. The Grandmother sweetly asks Bulie, Dielieno's brother, "What meat do you want?" (Kire 1). On hearing this, Dielieno, in all her excitement, says, "I want the leg, Grandmother, give me the leg" (Kire 1). The

Grandmother, at that very moment, rebukes her for asking for a leg piece: "I wasn't asking you, silly girl." (Kire 1). Saying this, she swiftly puts the chicken leg piece into her grandson's plate and says, "That portion is always for boys. Girls must eat the other portions" (Kire 1). The food eventually becomes a reminder of her secondary status vis-a-vis her brothers. First, a woman is not allowed to express her choice; secondly, her gender becomes detrimental to getting her proper food. If the metaphor of food explicates the unequal relationship between Dielieno and her brothers, the kitchen also is used as a learning ground for the young Dielieno. Her entry into the kitchen to take up culinary lessons and learn related skills is a step forward in the process of her becoming a woman. The space of the kitchen becomes a space of marginalisation and exploitation for her. The way she describes the kitchen as dark and her attempt to make her way in it metaphorically shows how the outer brightness is not meant for her, and she has to negotiate and adjust herself to the patriarchal darkness: "The kitchen was dark, and I stumbled over a low wooden stool. The bright sunshine outside has blinded me, and I carefully felt my way around the kitchen" (Kire 48). The Grandmother represents the exercise of this patriarchal control, a timely genderisation via food.

Continuous discrimination between Dielieno and her brothers based on food constantly reminds her of her inferior position in relation to her brothers. The grandmother ". . . had hobbled to the almirah to give a lump of jaggery to Leto (*Dielieno's brother*). My brother saw me return and gave me a bit to lick at. "Enough, enough, it is for you (*Leto*)," said the Grandmother . . ." (Kire 4). The grandmother felt that eating even a piece of jaggery may spoil the girl. Food culture and ethos unique to each culture clearly demarcates the gender boundaries like man gets pampering with serving first with a good share of food and that too of his choice but a woman is not only served last but also least and that too not of her choice. Dielieno even narrates how every single man and woman is given different spheres of work: "The old man from the village chopped firewood after a cup of tea had been given to him. His wife would dig up the garden to plant sweet potatoes or garlic, beans and maize. Some days, she would sit and weave rough cloths for Grandmother . . ." (Kire 16). This indicates the gendered spheres are demarcated exclusively

for a man and a woman. Even her mother further reinstates this gender discrimination via food. She says to Bulie, Dielieno's brother, "You're eating a man's share now, . . . and you can do a man's work as well" (Kire 57). On the one hand, Bulie is fed more than his sister which becomes a moment of pride for the mother but on the other hand, his sister being kept hungry and being denied the desired food is taken to be a norm in the society. Food draws a line between the two genders where one is ill-fed and the other is given more than one's requirements. This is what Virginia Woolf points out in *A Room of One's Own* where the men's luncheon parties are filled with copious amounts of food while the women's parties hardly have food on their tables. While the men are given proper food, sometimes even more than they require, women, on the other hand, *must* remain content with whatever they get. The discrimination does not stop here. It goes beyond this, where a woman is not even supposed to complain. She accepts it as a norm.

Food is also used to categorise and hierarchise women. The ones who cook food are respectable, and the ones who brew rice beer are the bad ones with no respect. Even on many occasions, a woman is pitted against another woman. Food becomes a basis of comparison between two women. Women are unable to stand in solidarity. Once when the grandmother asks her son, the narrator's father, about the best cook, he smartly tells her that she is the best. But when his own daughter exposes him by counter-questioning how he used to tell his wife that she cooks the best food, avoiding the direct answer, he says, "Ah yes, but not as good as your Grandmother . . ." (Kire 36). Food and the kitchen space conventionally have been extremely close to women since the kitchen is the place where politics is played out, where control and fear are generated, where a woman is being made or unmade, and where a woman realises that this space should remain with her. Cooking and food become an integral part of a woman's life and men are seen exploiting it quite often. To strengthen the web of patriarchal power and control, food and food work become important metaphors in the narrative. Discrimination towards Dielieno, especially via food, shows how control and conditioning start at a young age. This discrimination process is played 'terribly' by the grandmother, whose ultimate task throughout the narrative is to construct and transform Dielieno into a 'good woman'. The

grandmother keeps on commanding and controlling the household by telling or rather assigning everyone their roles and socially appropriate behavior. Once when Dielieno's brother is sent to fetch water because her mother is occupied in cooking, the grandmother reprimands: "Send the girl next time, that is girls' work. No man in my day has ever fetched water" (Kire 3). Food is not only used as a patriarchal trope to express gender discrimination but it is also used as a medium to extract control and power. The grandmother uses food as a pedagogical prompt to establish and strengthen gendered roles: "At Grandmother's house, it was always *her* food. I never thought of it as food. It had to be attached with the pronoun "her" to make it clear that it was food cooked and served by Grandmother, so she had every right to do with it as she wished" (Kire 1).

As a metaphor for gender identity and gender discrimination, food helps to establish a sense of identity in a class, tribe and community, and society. As food helps create cultural capital for a tribe, it becomes an emblem of its identity. Eating together even forms intimacy, and "[C]lass, caste, race and gender hierarchies are maintained, in part, through differential control over and access to food. One's place in the social system is revealed by what, how much and with whom one eats" (Counihan 8). The loss of food habits and cuisines leads to the loss of culture, values and belief systems. It can even lead to an identity crisis in another community/group/ tribe. "They Eat Meat!" by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar delineates a similar identity crisis. The story is about a Soren family which shifts to Vadodara in Gujarat after Biram Kumang gets his transfer. As Santhals from Orissa, the family, especially Panmuni-Jhi, Biram Kumang's wife, is sceptical and worried about the food and food culture of Gujrat. As soon as Panmuni Jhi gets to know her husband is transferred to another place, her immediate concern is food. She immediately tries to find an acquaintance in Gujarat to negotiate food. She gets one and calls Jhapan, who is there to offer her advice on food:

That we'll have to, Jhapan, I am more worried about where to stay and what to eat. You see, Jhapan?'
 'I understand, jhi. And that might be a problem.'
 'A problem?'

‘Yes, jhi. You see, the food habits here are very different. You may have to stop eating quite a few things we take for granted.’

‘Like what, Jhapan?’

‘Er... for one, people don’t eat meat here. No fish, no chicken, no mutton. Not even eggs.’ ‘Oh!’. (Shekhar 2)

It is the power structure of the majority/mainstream that instils fear in subaltern.

Food and Control

Domination and control by cultural and ideological means hegemonise and polarise the communities and people. In the story, one dominant/insider culture very subtly imposes its food culture upon the other/the outsider thus creating its own cultural hegemony. This thereby leads to social control whose primary objective is to make the other community conform to the dominant ideologies and cultural notions willingly, fearfully, or forcefully. Jill Haku, fish meat is very significant for Santhals; it is not just a food item but it is like a conduit for them to connect, form and strengthen their collective consciousness. Panmuni Jhi gets to know that people in Gujarat do not eat Jill-Haku. The very idea of giving it up gives a chill to them. Elwin also talks about this cultural change in the form of food during his interaction with the tribals. He remarks how the Gond people were forbidden to practice their food habits, “. . . wide forbidding the Gonds to eat beef or even yoke the cow to the plough, to abstain from pork and poultry, to avoid alcohol, and to prevent their women from dancing” (Shekhar 27). Elwin talks about how the mainstream culture forces the other cultures to give up all the practices, beliefs, customs and habits which they feel are not up to the mark: “Everything, therefore, that the Hindus despised must be abandoned” (Elwin 27-28). This is not an identity crisis for an individual but an identity crisis for the whole community. But Panmuni Jhi makes all efforts to keep her food and food habits intact.

“They Eat Meat” shows how one community is forced either to leave their own customs and rituals and accept the other culture and assimilate in order to survive in a different cultural location. These diasporic pressures have mentally displaced and disoriented tribals

and their communities from their beliefs, traditions and practices. Even within the country, the freedom of being just goes away as soon as geographical boundaries change. Though Sorens are from Odisha, they are forced to hide their real identity in Gujarat. "In Odisha, Panmuni-Jhi could be a Santhal, an Odia, a Bengali. In Gujarat, she had to be only a Gujarati" (Shekhar 8). The real identity is often caged or eclipsed in a new location and is under shadowed by a new and fake identity. Even their landlord, Mr. Rao, warns them that tribals must hide their true identity and refrain from eating chicken, mutton or eggs: "Tribals, even lower-caste Hindus, are seen as impure. I hope you understand" (Shekhar 9). Mr. Rao even asks Biram-Kumang, "'Er... Isn't Soren a tribal surname? . . ." (Shekhar 9). Although this statement completely shocked Biram Kumang, yet he answered the question lightly. To hide the real identity, one has to let go of different food habits, as Jhaphan remarks, "Jyamon des, tyamon bhes" (Shekhar 6). People like Mr. Rao and Jhaphan serve to validate the views, values, ideologies and experiences in society by suppressing subjectivity and highlighting objective viewpoints regarding food. But as Sorens get to know people in Gujarat, they try to appear to adapt themselves to the new cultural change to be majorly accepted by the cultural dominant majority. Within a year, they feel comfortable in the new environment. They start to conform to the new norms of the place as going to the temples, celebrating all the Hindu festivals, etc. Panmuni-Jhi too starts eating and enjoying outside. Though they are of ". . . Adivasi origin, they conformed to the norms- they went to mandirs, celebrated Hindu festivals, fasted on certain days, lit dhoop-batti in their house . . ." (Shekhar 13). These things made them acceptable in society, but the one thing they continued to miss was their food, although they had given up on meat and chicken. As food encapsulates semiotic value, it becomes a symbol of status, domesticity, discipline, and social values of a class and community. "It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations and behaviour" (Barthes 49-50). Mr. Rao confesses:

. . . You see, even we used to eat meat and chicken. And eggs. We used to have eggs for breakfast almost daily. My sons, they eat non-veg. But not when they're here. When we decided to settle here because this place is so neat and tidy-

we had to pay a small price. I hope you understand. (Shekhar 10)

This indicates how the mainstream culture completely rips off another culture, especially in terms of food. If food binds to the traditional value system, then it also holds a language of suppression and oppression. But old habits are hard to die. So on certain days, they cook eggs, but not only the disposing of egg shells but also the smell of eggs cause problem for them. So after cooking eggs once, they need to wait almost a week to cook egg again so that the smell goes out of the house and the neighbourhood stealthily. *Axone* also problematises the food odour. This continuous negotiation with the identity and habits within and the identity and habit outside is palpable throughout the narratives in *Axone* and "They Eat Meat". It becomes evident how food and foodways are not only controlled by a specific community but also by mainstream culture. Subhanpura is a small colony in Vadodara, Gujarat, comprising mostly outsiders such as the tribals, Mr. Rao from Andhra Pradesh and a Muslim family. But still, they are unable to have their own food in their way; rather are controlled by the outside insiders, i.e., Gujaratis. This fear of non-acceptance and violence makes several communities fearful of practising their customs. Though they are forbidden from cooking meat or eggs, Panmuni Jhi still dares to cook eggs at least, showing her courage and how she is able to connect with Mrs. Rao, her landlord. Mrs. Rao requests Panmuni Jhi's to fry an egg in her kitchen and Panmuni Jhi lets her which they then enjoy together. In order to douse its smell, they take an *elaichi* as a mouth freshener. Food thus, builds bonding comradeship. Mrs. Rao shares how even the kitchen, a conventionally women-centric space, is encroached upon by men when they instruct women what to cook and what not to. Not only is kitchen space controlled by men, but it is also used as a site of violence. Diellieno's brother, Vini, beats his wife daily under the influence of intoxication. Tired of being abused physically, mentally and emotionally, she runs out for help to Diellieno. Not finding an easy target to unleash his anger, he threatens the family members by violating the kitchen space. He breaks five plates and says, "Bring her back now or I will break all the plates in the house" (Kire 228). This shows the patriarchy's disrespect and exploitation of the kitchen space to satisfy his ego and self-assertion.

Though Biram Kumang and Panmuni-Jhi in “They Eat Meat” try to become part of the mainstream, they soon start to feel like caged birds. They begin to look down upon the norms they must conform to for survival. Maya Angelou’s “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings” aptly captures Soren’s mental state:

But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing. (lines 8-14)

The condition of the tribals is similar to that of a caged bird. Since they have to move out of their spaces to work or educate themselves, they often find themselves alienated from the rest of the world. They have to hide their identities, conform to the masked identities and give up even their traditional food that they have kept sacred for ages. Even Biram Kumang says, “We’re prisoners” (Shekhar 17). Finally, when they are transferred to Ranchi, Panmuni-Jhi is excited to move to “our area” where “no one minds what we eat here” (Shekhar 21). Though the Sorens are able to break free from the alien communal cultural hegemony but women, in general, are its biggest victims. At the micro level, within the family, a woman is a victim of patriarchal hegemony. And a tribal woman is victimised twice – at the level of race/tribe and at the level of gender. This patriarchal hegemony channelises its gendered social control to make women conform to traditional/conventional roles. Dielieno, in *A Terrible Matriarchy*, talks about the grandmother’s control over her and her brothers, even over her father and mother. This control is felt, read and reflected upon throughout the narrative through the medium of food. No one dares to question the control exercised by the grandmother and every character, in a way, agrees to be controlled.

The grandmother's house becomes a space for controlling and conditioning women where women are disciplined not to express their desires and disciplined not to eat or have more. This could, in a way, help control young girls and women's sexuality, desires and

aspirations. "But Grandmother would always ladle out more gravy and meat to Bulie or Vini and Leto" (Kire 14). That's why Dielieno calls her house a "little factory" (Kire 16) where a woman is made and constructed. With food comes control and domination. The process of becoming a woman is strengthened via food politics: "In my plate, I found a piece of chicken meat and lots of broth" (Kire 33). For Dielieno, food means just a piece of chicken meat with no leg pieces and lots of broth. The hegemon grandmother through her diktats for the portions to be distributed among girls and boys not only manifest her control over food and food politics but her overall control over her family. On certain occasions, grandmother tries to gain favours and keep the men under her control by offering them food. Through food, she constantly reminds the boys to visit her often, "Come to me, my dear boy, why haven't you come here for so long? Don't you know I have kept sweet potato aside for you? Didn't you say that my potatoes were the sweetest" (Kire 16). As food holds a language of its own, it becomes an exploitative tool in the hand of the grandmother to further gender conditioning and discrimination. Women ironically rule the kitchen space as every woman character in the narrative takes on the charge and responsibility of the kitchen but they fail to liberate themselves from the clutches of the gendered shackles. Rather they shake hands with the patriarchal norms. The politics of discrimination and identity conformism starts with the space of the kitchen. Even Dielieno clearly states how her mother killed her desires and aspirations: "She (*Mother*) thought it was sinful to eat too much of the food one really liked . . ." (Kire 2-3). Though the grandmother never cooks food, she likes serving. Dielieno says, "We would get a piece or two on our plates, and we would want so much to eat more but would have to be satisfied with what we got" (Kire 14); that is how women in the grandmother's house are kept ill-fed. Controlling food, especially for women, also means controlling desires, and patriarchy has always sought to control women's desires. The kitchen space thus, turns out to be a space of exploitation, endless labour and service, discrimination, violence, repression, control, power and taboos.

The grandmother tries to secure the confidence of her grandsons via food: "She tries to secure their loyalty by giving them food and money or the fields as she did with Vini" (Kire 251). This gender

politics is just to secure her future. She wants to remain powerful and exercise control over both men and women. She is the female patriarch. There is lopsidedness to this patriarchal control. The meat is never for the women but for the young ones. Even the father will not get a more significant portion of the meat since patriarchy believes in controlling or securing the future. Grandmother's whole concern shifts from the father to her grandsons. The narrator, on many occasions, envies her brothers for the attention they used to get since they were boys. Grandmother says that "[i]n my Father's Day, boys never did any work because they had to look after the village and engage enemy warriors in warfare. The household that did not have a male heir was considered barren. They were always in constant danger if there was a war. The women would only have one man to protect them. That is why we love our male children so much and give them the best food. And we should" (35-36). Grandmother holds power and influences through the culinary capital, which gives her the kind of autonomy that helps incarcerated women like the mother, Dielieno, Nisano and Bano. So to control, extend the control and gain security the grandmother exercises control via food politics.

Skoll, in *Social Theory of Fear*, says, "Nothing motivates like fear" (58). So, to establish control, fear is infused into society. With fear and terror, the roots of control become stronger since Control propagates and fear helps establish control better. Such control tactics make a woman fearful of her relations, her own acts and the people around her. It impacts her psyche, relations and her own confidence. Food even helps in generating fear in the minds of women. Another shade of the fear generated can be seen in the mother's character. Dielieno's mother is scared of not being ready with food before her husband returns home: "I have to get back home and cook before your father comes" (Kire 6). Even Dielieno confirms that her father has the same expectations from his wife as her mother has from herself: "[H]e would expect Mother to clean the house and wash all the clothes and have cooked food ready when he got home. It was a lot of work and took all morning" (Kire 47). Fear of aligning or conforming with the food practices of the mainstream, Panmuni-Jhi starts to persuade her family to eat home-cooked food by her and thus dissuade them from eating outside. The same control can be seen in the actions of the grandmother in *A Terrible Matriarchy*. Women are

conditioned to believe that only food can bind men to the home and ultimately can bring a sense of security to women. The way the grandmother tries to secure her position in society via food, Panmuni-Jhi does the same. This is evident in the way she tries to master every 'fancy' food item available outside:

Panmuni-Jhi had also mastered several 'fancy' items in restaurants and roadside stalls, phuchka, masala dosa, chowmein, chilli chicken, and the like. If she came to know that her sons had eaten chilli chicken somewhere, she would make the dish at home and ask them which one was better. (Shekhar 1-2)

Panmuni-Jhi maintains high standards in the kitchen and keeps on resisting the outside food. She experiments liberally in the kitchen and asserts, "If I don't get food cooked to my satisfaction, I will not eat" (Shekhar 5). She creates her own standard in regard to food and does not flinch from showcasing her creative skills in the kitchen. Even her own son, Rabi, says, "If my mother is given cowdung, she can make pitha out of it" (Shekhar 6).

Bodily Exploitation via Hunger

Food also helps to create a binary, where men generally overeat and women are just left hungry. Mother in *A Terrible Matriarchy* is seen going ill-fed throughout the narrative. The burdens of motherhood, or how a woman is prepared for motherhood, are tested through her sacrificing food for the sake of her family and children. Patience and hunger establish a woman's essential characteristic traits. She is supposed to feed her kids properly before feeding herself. Even Dielieno agrees that her mother can sacrifice her every share of food just to satiate her boys' hunger: "I had often seen her scraping the pot and giving it to Leto, my eldest brother, or taking meat pieces from her own plate to slip into Vini's plate, saying she is full. The boys never refused" (Kire 2). Interestingly, the sons never notice this. It is the daughter only who is sensitive to this as she is kept hungry by her grandmother. She craves an adequate amount of food but never gets it. The process of othering never stops as Bano says, "... girl children are never considered real members of the family. Their mission in life

is to marry and have children and be able to cook and weave cloths and look after household” (Kire 249). Women are just expected to become “good workers” who not only sacrifice their being but also give up their hunger and stay satiated with whatever little food they get. Lack of food creates hunger, and hunger is used as a patriarchal tool to exploit the woman’s body. This exploitation becomes more severe on a poor tribal woman’s body. In Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar’s “November Is The Month of Migrations” Talamai Kisku, a twenty-year-old Santhal and her body is exploited merely for “two pieces of cold bread pakora and a fifty-rupee note. . .” (Shekhar 23). How the patriarchy exploits a woman’s constraints like hunger, working situations, helplessness, and physical weakness in the name of food and financial support. Since Talamai Kisku is hungry, she lets the *jawan* of the Railway Protection Force exploit her body. Tribal narratives like this one openly show the multi-level marginalisation – as a woman, as a tribal woman and as a poor tribal woman. The *jawan* seeing an opportunity to exploit the body of Talamai, asks her, “Are you hungry?” (Shekhar 30) and finally lures her with the money by asking, “You need money?” (Shekhar 31). As soon as she agrees to have money and two pieces of cold bread *pakora*, he asks, “Will you do some work for me?” (Shekhar 31). She lets him ‘rape’ her as the only thing she is concerned about at that moment is the food and money.

Conclusion

Food is an essential metaphor for belongingness and holds its discourse on exploitation, acceptance, and genderisation in the family and society. The kitchen is an essential space in the tribal world too. Even when the grandmother dies in *A Terrible Matriarchy*, her spirit comes into the kitchen to haunt the tenets. Dielieno says, “Something fell from the shelf to the floor of the kitchen” (Kire 268), and it becomes evident that the spirit of the grandmother has come. Food and the kitchen play a crucial role in the spiritual system of the tribals. Dielineo repositions herself, tries to re-orient the gendered roles, and challenges the patriarchal paradigms via food. Though food is the medium via which her genderisation is carried out, she does not let it become a norm. She continuously observes, talks and writes about it.

End Note

¹ Easterine Kire, in her novel, *A Terrible Matriarchy*, intentionally associates Grandmother with capital 'G' while I have stuck to normal usage. Mother and father are referred to as Mother and Father with the capital 'M' and 'F.' Kire gives no name to all these characters in her novel. She associates these characters with the others who are given roles to control and subjugate. She capitalises the first letter to show their hegemony, power and control over the rest of the characters in their society.

Works Cited

- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *We Should All Be Feminists*. Fourth Estate, 2014.
- Archana. "Gender Discrimination: Shadow Power of Matriarchy in Easterine Irulu's *A Terrible Matriarchy*". *The Indian Review of World Literature in English*, vol. 14, no. II, July- Dec 2018, pp. 15-21.
- Axone. Directed by Nicholas Kharkongor, Saregama India's Film Division, 2019.
- Barthes, Roland. "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption." *European Diet from Pre-Industrial to Modern Times*, edited by Elborg Foster and Robert Foster. Harper and Row, 1995.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*, Vintage Classics, 2015.
- Connell, Raewyn. *Gender: In World Perspective*. Polity Press, 2009.
- Counihan, Carole M. *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning and Power*. Routledge, 1999.
- Dastider, Monali Ghosh. "Food and Gender Symbolism in Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy*". *Rock Pebbles*, vol. XXIV, no. III, 2020, pp. 46-51.
- Du Gay, Paul, et al. *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*. SAGE, 1997.
- Gour, Veena. "Native Culture and Gender Politics in Nagaland: A Study of Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy*". *IJELLH*, vol. 9, issue 2, 2021, pp. 97- 105.
- Elwin, Verrier. Introduction. *The Oxford India Elwin*, by G. N. Devy. Oxford UP, 2009, pp. 3-34.
- Shekhar, Hansda Sowvendra. *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*. Speaking Tiger, 2017.
- Fauzi, Siti Zaharah Syahiera and Siti Nuraishah Ahmad. "Nyonya Food, Culinary Capital and Women's Empowerment in Stella Kon's *Emily of Emerald Hill* and Selina Siak's *The Woman Who Breathed Two Worlds*". *3L: Language, Linguistics and Literature*, vol. 28(4), 2022, pp. 110-123.

- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Penguin, 2020.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Totem and Taboo*. New York, 1918.
- Kennedy, Maria. "Agrarian Eve to Original Sin: Cultural Narratives of Women in the American Cider Industry". *New Directions in Folklore*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2020, pp. 27-43.
- Kire, Easterine. *A Terrible Matriarchy*. Zubaan, 2007.
- Kharbe, Ambreen. "Dual Jeopardy of Naga Women in Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy*". *Indian Scholar*, vol. 5, issue 3, 2019, pp. 10-16.
- Knight, Linda. "The Sensational and Pedagogical Affects of Food Illustrations". *Locale: The Australasian-Pacific Journal of Regional Food Studies*, no. 7, 2018, pp. 122-131.
- Millet, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. Columbia UP, 2016.
- Mukhopadhyay, Kanchan, editor. *Food and Power: Expressions of Food-Politics in South Asia*. SAGE, 2020.
- Rengma, Sharon Seb, and Sivasish Biswas. "Women vis-a-viz Politics and Insurgency in Northeast India: A Reading of Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* and Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy*". *IJIRAS*, vol. 3, issue 9, 2016, pp. 35-38.
- Skool, Geoffrey R.. *Social Theory of Fear: Terror, Torture, and Death in a Post-Capitalist World*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Vaughan, Theresa A. "What Color is Your Gravy?". *AFS/Canadian Joint Meeting*, October 2007.
- Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. Alma Classics, 2019.



De-aestheticising Animal Cruelty: A Critical Study of Aravind Malagatti's *Government Brahmana*

Pooja Duggal*

Abstract

The paper focuses on analysing the representation of animals in the Dalit autobiography *Government Brahmana* by Aravind Malagatti. This autobiographical narrative raises questions about the welfare and agency of animals, challenging societal norms and cultural practices that may overlook the well-being and autonomy of animals. The paper explores how the autobiography 'de-aestheticises' animal cruelty and challenges the mainstream tendency to portray animal suffering in an aesthetic manner. It examines *Government Brahmana* from the perspective of animal-standpoint criticism in order to demonstrate how it de-aestheticises animal cruelty and sheds light on the ethical and moral dimensions of human-animal relationships depicted in the text.

Keywords: Dalit autobiography, Animal-standpoint criticism, Human-animal relationship, De-aestheticising animal cruelty, Acknowledged referent.

Introduction

Dalit autobiographies recount the stories of individuals from marginalised 'untouchable' communities in India as they strive for self-realisation and fight for their human rights. Through meticulous analysis of these autobiographies, one can discern the deliberate use of animals as symbolic representations, depicting

* Ph.D. Research Scholar in the Department of English and Cultural Studies at Panjab University, Chandigarh.

the shift of Dalits from being perceived as nonhuman subjects to becoming central figures in the narrative. Animals are employed as metaphors in Dalit autobiographies to convey the multifaceted aspects of Dalit life and their struggle against oppression. These metaphors feature the intersectionality of caste, power and discrimination, shedding light on both personal experiences and the wider social context. One way animals are used as metaphors is to illustrate the dehumanising treatment and subjugation faced by Dalits. By drawing parallels between the mistreatment of animals and the discrimination endured by Dalits, writers reveal the oppressive social order that devalues and exploits both groups. This portrayal reveals the inherent violence in caste-based discrimination and the shared quest for liberation. Through the use of animals as metaphors, Dalit autobiographies surpass the limitations imposed on Dalits as mere ‘untouchables’ and redefine their narrative subjectivity. Animals serve as potent symbols that amplify the voices of Dalits, enabling them to express their experiences, challenge oppressive systems and assert their human rights. The inclusion of these animal metaphors broadens the scope of Dalit narratives, offering nuanced perspectives on caste-based discrimination.

However, using animals as metaphors in this manner tends to aestheticise animal cruelty and reinforce the notion of human superiority over animals (Donovan 2011). Several critics, including John Simons, a pioneer in animal-standpoint criticism, have raised objections to the figurative use of animals. In his work, *Animal Rights and the Politics of Literary Representation* (2002), Simons emphasises that while symbols are a prevalent form of animal representation, “animals are not symbols” (7). He advocates for exploring texts where animals are not merely “displaced metaphors for the human” (6). Additionally, Carol J. Adams (1990) objects to the use of animals in a metaphorical sense, emphasising that when animals are employed as metaphors, “[they] become absent referents, whose fate is transmuted into a metaphor for someone else’s existence or fate” (67). In recent years, there has been a growing interest among literary critics in reassessing the portrayal of animals in literature, likely influenced by the animal rights

movement. These critics examine the ideological implications of animal representation, criticise the widespread aesthetic exploitation of animal suffering and explore alternative forms of representation. They aim to either rediscover neglected texts that offer different perspectives on animals or propose new approaches that avoid “reduce[ing] the animal to a blank screen for the projection of human meaning”, as expressed by Philip Armstrong (3). The present paper analyses the representation of animals in Aravind Malagatti’s *Government Brahmana* (2007), a Dalit autobiography in the same light. It explores the manner in which this Dalit narrative de-aestheticises animal cruelty rather than aestheticising it. The driving force for the present analysis is thus shaped by the exploration of how the selected Dalit narrative brings animals into the foreground and takes their suffering with gravity. This will be accomplished through the lens of animal-standpoint criticism. According to Josephine Donovan, “identifying ideologically-driven representation in literary texts establishes a theoretical basis for animal-standpoint criticism” (203). She also adds that “the central underlying concern of animal-standpoint critics is, however, the aesthetic exploitation of animal pain, the aestheticisation of animal cruelty” (205). This critical approach is driven by a deep concern regarding the portrayal of animal pain solely for aesthetic purposes, as well as the transformation of acts of cruelty towards animals into objects of aesthetic appreciation. An animal-standpoint critic may pose the question of why the author chooses to ignore or repress the suffering of animals within the literary work. The likely answer to this inquiry lies in the prevailing speciesist.¹ Assumptions that allow for such disregard and lack of awareness lead to a blind spot regarding animal suffering within the literature.

By adopting an animal-standpoint perspective, the paper unveils how *Government Brahmana* confronts and subverts the conventional norms of representing animal cruelty, offering a more compassionate and nuanced portrayal of animals within the narrative.

Beliefs, Legends and Power Dynamics: Unravelling the Human-Animal Relationship

Beliefs and mythologies often play a significant role in shaping the human-animal relationship. Some animals may be regarded as sacred or imbued with spiritual significance, leading to rituals, ceremonies and practices centred around them. These beliefs can influence the treatment and conservation of certain animal species, as well as the roles animals play in folk narratives. Malagatti writes:

Isn't it said that the crow, the owl, the dog, the donkey, the sheep and the bison are rishi Vishwamitra's creations, while the pigeon, the horse, the cow and animals such as these are rishi Vasishta's creations? It seems the brahmin sage Vasishta could create pure, white, sweet-voiced, sweet-tempered, mild and beautiful animals and birds, and rishi Vishwamitra could create only those with the opposite qualities. (17)

The above lines portray a mythological belief system that ascribes different qualities and characteristics to the creations of different sages, namely Vishwamitra and Vasishta. This mythological narrative reflects and reinforces certain social and cultural beliefs that existed at the time of its creation. It presents a hierarchical distinction between the creations of the two sages and links it to their respective statuses as Brahmins. The passage also implies that a non-Brahmin, represented by Rishi Vishwamitra, could never attain the elevated status of a supreme Rishi like Vasishta, regardless of their penance or achievements. These myths, deeply ingrained in the cultural and social fabric, can perpetuate discriminatory ideas and reinforce social hierarchies. They suggest that social status and caste play a role in determining one's inherent qualities. Malagatti implies that these myths serve as vehicles for perpetuating social hierarchies and biases, including the denial of certain privileges or status based on caste or social background. By examining these myths, the author probably intends to expose the intrinsic discrimination and unfairness woven into the fabric of social systems. His commentary on these myths demonstrates the underlying bias and discriminatory implications they carry. He

poses thought-provoking inquiries regarding the inherent biases and discriminatory notions present within cultural mythologies and the difficulty of eradicating them entirely when he says, "These myths are so deep-rooted that while you think you have uprooted them completely, they will spring up like weeds - such is their nature" (17). Delving into the realm of caste-based discrimination, he further includes a poem, signed as Brahmana Bandaya:

Look, how many castes exist
among animals, birds and plants.
How can there not be caste among men?
Think a little.
Among cows, dogs, donkeys, tigers,
cats, pigs, fox, rats,
deer, monkeys, fish- how many castes are there?
Likewise among men,
Whites, blacks, tribes, harijans,
Chinese, Japanese, Turks, Mongolians,
Aryans, Dravidians, brahmana, shudra...(17)

Through this poem, Malagatti draws critical attention towards the existence of caste divisions in both the natural and human realms. His tone carries an undertone of frustration or doubt as if challenging the reader to consider the injustice and irrationality of perpetuating caste-based discrimination. He writes, "Can a horse mate with a bitch? No! So what is caste after all? It is a group of similar animals which can mate with their females and produce offspring... and human beings together are a caste" (18). The poem employs a concise and thought-provoking approach to unearth the persistence of caste divisions in human society. By drawing parallels with the natural world, it contests the notion that caste hierarchies are natural or justified. By citing this poem, Malagatti urges us to reflect critically on the social constructs that perpetuate discrimination and emphasises the need for introspection and change.

Furthermore, Malagatti puts up a question, "How can a society, which does not let even the creations of Vishwamitra make love naturally, give a chance for human lovers to meet? Which is why

stories like that of Marammadevi and the buffalo have branched out so widely” (25), which raises a provocative dilemma regarding the cultural constraints on natural love. It raises the dilemma of how a society that even curtails the ability of nonhuman creations, such as those attributed to Vishwamitra, to express their natural love can provide an opportunity for human lovers to meet and pursue their relationships freely. It points out to the inconsistencies and inequalities within societal norms, which trace back to the mythological world. The folk legend surrounding Marammadevi² presents a compelling narrative that illustrates the intricate nature of social hierarchies, caste dynamics and the repercussions of defying traditional practices. Folk legends like this one often serve as cautionary tales, reinforcing social norms and emphasising the severe consequences of deviating from them. They reflect the deeply ingrained social structures and beliefs prevalent within a particular community or region, drawing attention to the intricacies of caste-based hierarchies and the significance of caste identity. Thus, it becomes crucial to critically examine such narratives and consider the implications they have on reinforcing or challenging social inequalities and discrimination based on caste. It is important to recognise that such narratives, despite representing certain religious beliefs and historical realities, can also perpetuate and justify discrimination and inequality based on caste. They may reinforce the idea that individuals should adhere to their assigned social roles and restrict their interactions and relationships within the boundaries dictated by the caste system. So, by posing such a question, the author encourages interrogating and opposing the limitations and injustices imposed by caste-based discrimination. The narrative calls for societal advancement towards inclusivity and equality.

In the narrative, revolving around the “he-buffalo” and “she-buffalo” (Malagatti 17), the animals are depicted as having agency and their own desires as they engage in communication and exhibit behaviours such as running and responding to each other. They started a conversation, as the author describes, “The buffalo started moosing, ‘Hyaom...hyaom...’ The he-buffalo inside responded, ‘Yaom...yaom...’ The animals began a conversation” (23). The portrayal of the animals possessing their own intentions and actions

contests the conventional anthropocentric viewpoint that perceives animals as passive entities or solely existing for human use. Moreover, the narrative depicts the social dynamics and cultural significance attributed to these animals. The presence of he-buffaloes is associated with prestige and status for the village heads, symbolising power and dominance. This reflects the way in which animals can be embedded in human systems of hierarchy and social structures, where certain species or individuals within species are valued more than others. Also, it is crucial to mention that there were no he-buffaloes in the author's village. As a result, they had to take their she-buffalo to the neighbouring villages of Kuntoji and Basarkod, when she was on 'heat'. However, the power dynamics come into play, when the man refused their plea to mate their buffalo with his own, stating:

'Hey old woman, didn't we tell you the last time,
we have got the buffalo castrated?
We no longer let him near a she-buffalo.
Didn't we tell you that we use him now for drawing water
from the well?' (23)

This comment revolves around the castration of the buffalo and the shift in its role from mating with she-buffaloes to drawing water from the well. It underscores the control humans exert over animals and the extent to which their lives and functions are manipulated for human benefit. It raises moral concerns regarding the welfare and agency of the animal, as its natural behaviours and reproductive instincts are overridden for human convenience. Castration, in this context, is a physical alteration that limits the buffalo's ability to engage in natural mating behaviours. It restricts reproductive autonomy and modifies its behaviours to fit human requirements. The buffalo becomes a mere tool for labour, serving as a tool for drawing water. The use and exploitation of animals in this manner reveal the power dynamics that exist within human-animal relationships, portraying animals as commodities to meet human demands. From an animal-standpoint criticism, this narrative demands a critical examination of the ethical implications of such actions. It casts doubt on the degree to which humans should

intervene in the natural lives and behaviours of animals and raises concerns about the animal's well-being and quality of life.

Through these depictions, the author aims to emphasise the ethical implications of human-animal relationships. The author expresses apprehensions about the welfare and agency of animals, emphasising the utilisation and exploitation of animals to fulfil human requirements. The autobiography, thus, reflects on the ethical considerations surrounding the control and manipulation of animals, challenging social traditions and cultural practices that may overlook the well-being and autonomy of animals.

Unleashing Agency: Exploring the Dynamics of Caste Prejudice and Animal Subjectivity

Aravind Malagatti's autobiographical narrative becomes truly engrossing as he skilfully incorporates the agency and subjectivity of animals. By portraying animals as active agents with their own desires, intentions, and perspectives, Malagatti undermines the traditional anthropocentric worldview that places humans at the centre and diminishes the agency and significance of nonhuman beings. In the chapter titled "When Handya's hose was slashed", the author describes the greatness of Handya, the dog, as "He was threatening the other dogs and exhibiting his axe-like teeth, as if in challenge: 'Come near her if you dare!'" to protect a female dog from them (52). Later on, the mating scene of Handya with the bitch is described as, "Handya had finally shown his manliness. He was on a flowerbed with his queen, experiencing heaven!" (52). This approach of attributing agency and subjectivity to Handya aligns with the broader objectives of animal studies and literature, as it emphasises the importance of recognising and valuing the inherent worth and experiences of animals. By giving animals a voice and agency in his narrative, Malagatti likely aims to demonstrate the complex interplay between humans and animals, as well as to provoke critical reflection on our treatment and relationship with nonhuman creatures. Engaging with animals as active agents in literature not only enriches the narrative but also stimulates a re-evaluation of our comprehension of animals' capacities, emotions and perspectives. In this profound exploration, Malagatti's narrative

elevates animals from passive objects to active agents, sparking a vital reconsideration of our intricate relationship with the nonhuman world.

In a haunting display of caste-based discrimination, the narrative unfolds with the shocking account of Handya, whose tragic fate epitomises the stark realities of caste dynamics within the village. It unfolds like, "Announcing that it is a dog belonging to the lower castes, he slashed its penis with a sickle...The dog started writhing on the ground. Then people pelted stones at it and finally killed it." This poignant episode exposes the depths of caste prejudice and human cruelty as it depicts the harrowing fate of Handya, a once esteemed hunting dog. It reflects on the caste dynamics prevalent within the village, where even animals are assigned castes and subjected to segregation based on these divisions. The incident presents a distressing portrayal of the intersectionality between caste dynamics and animal cruelty within the village. It brings into view the pervasive caste prejudice that extends beyond human interactions to include animals, emphasising the deep-rooted nature of caste-based segregation and discrimination. The act of mutilating Handya reflected the dehumanising effect of caste prejudice, as the dog is subjected to a brutal attack solely based on its assigned lower caste. This act serves as a stark reminder of the devaluation and degrading treatment that individuals from lower castes face, even extending to animals associated with them. Furthermore, the subsequent stoning and killing of Handya highlight the underlying human cruelty that permeates the village, underscoring the desensitisation towards violence and the normalisation of inflicting harm towards animals, within the social fabric shaped by caste-based discrimination. While the author's stance against speciesism is not explicitly stated, it is possible to see an implicit rejection of speciesist ideology in his scepticism and critique of the social paradoxes related to relationships.

The Acknowledged Referent

In the chapter titled "Dead Sheep and Meat Heaps", Malagatti delves into the human-animal relationship, placing special emphasis

on the interconnectedness between humans and sheep. It depicts a vivid and somewhat graphic description of the activities and experiences surrounding the handling of sheep carcasses and the trade of meat. The description of tasks such as butchering, skinning, and cleaning underscores the physical connection and intimate engagement with the animal's body. This portrayal emphasises the interdependence and reliance on animals for sustenance and livelihood. It showcases the instrumentalisation of animals, where the sheep's carcass and its parts are viewed as commodities, as they are measured, bought and sold. The financial value attached to different parts of the animal emphasises the utilitarian perspective in which animals are seen primarily as sources of meat and profit. However, Malagatti has provided a detailed description of how sheep become meat. He has not tried to make sheep behind the meat heap an 'absent referent.'³ The act of recognising and acknowledging the living being that is turned into meat or animal products is what I have termed as the 'acknowledged referent.' The 'acknowledged referent' could be described as the opposite of the 'absent referent' concept proposed by Carol J. Adams. The acknowledged referent refers to actively recognising and acknowledging the living being that is turned into meat or animal products. It involves recognising that the meat on a plate was once a sentient being with emotions, desires and a capacity to experience suffering. By embracing the acknowledged referent, individuals can develop a deeper sense of empathy and connection to the animals, emphasising the importance of considering the welfare of animals.

In his writings about his personal encounters with dead sheep, Malagatti actively acknowledges the existence of the living being associated with meat heaps. He writes, "I had to pour water while the sheep was being skinned and the inner parts - intestines, liver, heart, lungs, gall bladder, pancreas - were being cleaned" (32). In a separate occurrence, the author recognises the presence of a live animal connected to the meat of a dead sheep when its owner comes to inquire about his lost sheep. The narrative emphasises the substitution of a live animal with a dead body, as the author vividly portrays the presence of dead animal bodies behind meat in his detailed descriptions. Unlike disregarding animals as absent referents, Malagatti's approach involves recognising animals,

specifically sheep, explicitly and acknowledging their physical existence as essential for the production of meat. It becomes evident when he mentions in order for the shop to open, "there had to be a dead animal in the village" (35). The notion expressed by Malagatti aligns with the concept that Adams explores, where she emphasises, "one essential part of meat's meaning is static: One does not eat meat without the death of an animal" (Adams 66). Also, Malagatti describes a rather unconventional and playful interaction with the sheep's intestines during the cleaning and butchering process. The narrative portrays a specific activity that some individuals engaged in, involving poking the intestine with a thorn or small sharp stick. As a result, the contents of the intestine would squirt out, splashing onto the mouth and face of the person sitting opposite. At times, the person pouring water into the intestine to remove the shit would accidentally prick it, causing him to drop the intestine. This would lead to a chase within the hut, where the individuals would spray the shit over the person who had dropped it. The author remarks, "Thus, we played games using the shit and intestines of sheep as our toys" (33).

The narrative indicates that the individuals involved in this activity found amusement in such interactions, using the squirting of the intestinal contents as a form of play. They had become accustomed to the foul odour associated with this work and had seemingly forgotten the smell of fresh air. It suggests that their work environment and experiences had shaped their perception of normalcy and what they considered as play. Also, the descriptions provide sensory details, such as the foul odour, the tactile sensations of handling the intestines, and the visual presence of flies. This presents the embodied experiences of working with animal bodies and the sensory aspects of engaging with them. The author exemplifies the olfactory experience, describing the unpleasant scent of the work environment and the distinct odour associated with the sheep's internal organs. Furthermore, the presence of flies and the need to drive them away underscores the difficulties and discomfort that come with interacting with animals. However, the chapter touches upon ethical considerations and cultural norms surrounding the handling of animals. While there are moments of playfulness and humour involving the use of sheep intestines, the

boundaries of acceptability and appropriateness are also acknowledged, as indicated by Maava, stopping the children from engaging in such activities. After such a vivid description of dead sheep and meat heaps, the author also mentions a shift in his own taste preference. Despite having previously enjoyed non-vegetarian food, he now claims to have lost the taste for it. He acclaims, "But now I have lost taste for non-vegetarian food. And I have not had the time to think why" (35). The author admits not having given much thought as to why this change occurred, leaving room for personal reflection and further exploration of his evolving relationship with food.

Blurring Boundaries: The Fluid Interactions of Humans and Animals

Government Brahmana provides a glimpse into the complex and multifaceted ways in which humans and animals coexist and interact within a specific cultural and environmental setting. The chapter "The black cat did not turn white" portrays a harmonious coexistence between humans and animals, particularly cattle. It emphasises the integration of animals into human activities and experiences and the range of emotions, risks, and embodied connections that come with such interactions. For instance, the author writes, "While my avva and her sisters washed their clothes, we would dive into the same water. Leeches would trouble us because we swam without wearing underwear. Though we feared they would enter our arse-holes, we swam with complete abandon" (29). So, this mention of leeches and the fear of them entering the author's "arse-holes" adds an element of vulnerability and risk to the interaction. This showcases the physical and sensory experiences involved in engaging with animals.

While talking about his experience at the ditches, the author also adds, "It was fun swimming in the shallow waters. Even the cattle swam with us comfortably. A ride on them was sheer joy" (29). As it seems, the ditches filled with gravel serve as a space where both humans and animals interact. The act of swimming with cattle and enjoying a ride on them reflects a form of embodied engagement with animals. It demonstrates the embodied

experiences of humans and their connection to nonhuman animals in the environment. The fact that the cattle are described as swimming alongside the children and providing them with a joyful ride suggests a level of comfort and familiarity between the two species that extends beyond mere utility or exploitation. This indicates that there is a degree of mutual acceptance and integration of animals into the everyday lives of the Dalits in the village. Additionally, it implies a blurring of boundaries between humans and animals, challenging the conventional human-animal dichotomy. The act of swimming together creates a shared experience and accentuates the interconnectedness of different beings within a particular cultural milieu.

Conclusion

The paper has delved into how this autobiography disrupts the inclination to depict animal suffering in an aesthetic manner, opting instead to underscore the ethical and moral aspects of the human-animal relationships depicted within the text. Through his autobiography, he disrupts cultural and societal paradigms that uphold speciesist attitudes, exposing the arbitrary boundaries that humans have placed between themselves and other animals. In addition, the narrative in *Government Brahmana* depicts animals as having their own intentions, actions and agency, challenging the traditional anthropocentric view that animals are passive objects or solely exist for human use or consumption. By doing so, the autobiography invites critical reflection on the treatment of animals, promoting empathy and understanding across different species. By de-aestheticising animal cruelty, the autobiography attempts to take another look at social conventions and confront discriminatory beliefs. It serves as a powerful tool for promoting empathy, understanding and social change.

Endnotes:

1. Richard Ryder was the first to use the term 'speciesism' in his essay "Experiments on Animals" in 1971. The term was subsequently developed and popularised by the Australian philosopher Peter Singer in his book *Animal Liberation*, first published in 1975. Singer defines speciesism as a discriminatory belief system that gives preferential

- treatment to humans solely based on their species membership, disregarding the interests and moral worth of nonhuman animals.
2. The folk legend about Marammadevi depicts a narrative where an untouchable man, pretending to be a brahmin, marries a brahmin girl Maramma. As a result of his deceit, he is cursed to be reborn as a buffalo and ultimately consumed by the goddess Maramma.
 3. Carol J. Adams introduced the concept of the 'absent referent' in her book *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, which refers to the intentional erasure or avoidance of acknowledging the living being that is turned into meat. By removing the connection between the animal and the meat, individuals can ignore the suffering and violence involved in the production of meat products.

Works Cited:

- Adams, Carol J. *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*. Continuum, 1990.
- Armstrong, Philip. *What Animals Mean in the Fictions of Modernity*. Routledge, 2008.
- Donovan, Josephine. "Aestheticizing Animal Cruelty." *College Literature*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2011, pp.202–17.
- Malagatti, Aravind. *Government Brahmana*. Translated by Dharani Devi Malagatti et al., Orient Longman, 2007.
- Simons, John. *Animal Rights and the Politics of Literary Representation*. Palgrave, 2002.



Manhood in Crisis: A Reading of Gender Fluidity in Nuruddin Farah's *Maps*

Sehnaz Rofique Saikia*

Abstract

Viewing masculinity as a construct, the paper underscores the presence of malleability and fluidity within the concept of masculinity through a detailed analysis of Nuruddin Farah's novel *Maps* (1986). I have discussed how the presence of fluidity in the protagonist Askar's identity—defined by the presence of a woman within him and the influence of Misra in his life—prevents him from attaining a hegemonic masculine identity. The paper also examines the psychological crisis of Askar induced by the patriarchal panopticon as he fails to perform the normative masculinity which will place him in a privileged position within the power structure. Thus, the paper highlights the fact that patriarchy has a detrimental effect not only on women, but men are also its victims.

Keywords: masculinity, gender fluidity, *Maps*, patriarchy

All is illusion — the words written, the mind at which they are aimed, the truth they are intended to express, the hands that will hold the paper, the eyes that will glance at the lines. Every image floats vaguely in a sea of doubt — and the doubt itself is lost in an unexplored universe of uncertainty.

— Joseph Conrad

The second part of Nuruddin Farah's *Maps* opens with this quote from Conrad's letter to Edward Garnett dated September 16, 1899. These lines are significant in discerning the presence of fluidity in

* Senior Research Fellow in the Department of English, Gauhati University, India.

Askar's identity. In context of the instability connoted in the above statement, I would explore the presence of 'aporia' in the protagonist's manifestation of a stable sexual and national identity. The novel *Maps* exhibits certain postmodern characteristics like uncertainty and fluidity in its exploration of the question of identity. The novel's refusal to privilege a stable identity is strongly influenced by postmodernist claims of a fluid subjectivity. The novel represents Askar's quest to stabilise his subjectivity by affirming his Somali roots. However, he maps his identity through ambiguous trajectories, which in turn foregrounds the presence of 'aporia' within the Somali cultural roots. In this context, the paper explores the representation of fluidity in Askar's masculine identity and the perpetual crisis by foregrounding three key strands in the novel: his relation with Misra; the Dream motif; and the patriarchal panopticon. The paper will also study how the shifting nature of Askar's identity induces within him a social concern ingrained by the patriarchal panopticon leading to a psychological crisis. *Maps*, the first book of the "Blood in the Sun" trilogy, was published in 1986. With the background of Ogaden War between Somalia and Ethiopia, it depicts the story of Askar, a Somali orphan, and charts his yearning for a homogenised identity, both at micro and macro levels. Askar's boyhood in Kallafo with his foster mother Misra is the main thrust of his story. It follows him from the beginning of the Ogaden War (1977–1978) when he leaves for the home of his maternal uncle and aunt Hilaal and Salaado in the Somali capital Mogadiscio, all the way to his ten-year reunion with Misra there, where Misra is being treated as a traitor by the Somali Liberation War Front. As a result, it portrays Askar's conflict of having to choose between his attachment to his Ethiopian foster mother Misra and his expected commitment to his ethnic Somali identity.

The central thematic concern in the novel is Askar's formulation of a Somali identity in its essentialised form. Askar hopes to construct this identity through his allegiance to Somali cultural nationalism that attempts to reterritorialise all Somali-speaking territories into one. But the novel destabilises the notions of essentialism by manifesting the impossibility of such re-integration through the enhancement of incertitude and indeterminacy in the protagonist's perception of gender and national identity. According to Todd Reeser, " ...

nationality and gender are often put in dialogue with each other since one can help prop up the other" because both are considered as "key ideologically defined aspects of subjectivity" (177). The manifestation of masculinity is crucial to make nationalism appear as a natural phenomenon. Masculinity and nationality are represented as dialogic, as each influences the other. In the novel, Askar wishes to join the military to manifest allegiance to the Somali community, wants to fight for the reunification of Somali territories and thereby endorse Somali cultural homogeneity. But as observed by Charles Sugnet, Farah in the novel "was never willing to grant the exclusive masculinity of the national subject, and perhaps his gender politics made it inevitable from the start that [Askar] would not or could not perform a nationalist reterritorialisation" (745). Thus, the protagonist is unable to foreground his masculine identity as the authentic identity because of his unsolidified gender identity.

In fact, his fluid gender identity also reflects the fragmentation in his Somali identity because no matter how much he tries, he can never succeed in attaining an essentialised Somali identity. One core reason for the impossibility of attaining such an identity is that the self, which Askar wants to stabilise through his attempt to reintegrate Ogaden to its Somali roots on the grounds of cultural homogeneity, is itself shifting. The shifting nature of the Ogaden is a prominent example of the aftermath of colonialism. The Ogaden, which is inhabited by the Somalis, was handed to Ethiopia by the British colonisers in 1948, sowing the seeds of incessant conflict between Ethiopia and the Somali Republic for the occupation of the Ogaden region. The Somali nationalistic fervour, ignited by the Western Somali Liberation Front for the reunification of Ogaden to Somalia, was successful in seizing the Ogaden in 1977 from Ethiopia. However, the victory of the Somalis was short-lived, as Ethiopian forces aided by Russia regained control of Ogaden in 1978. The identity of the disputed Ogaden is itself marked with ambiguity and indeterminacy. This fluid identity of Ogaden is specified in the novel when Hilaal remarks that "the Ogaden as Somali is truth. To the Ethiopian map-maker, the Ogaden, as Somali, is untruth" (229). This remark by Hilaal is crucial as it foregrounds the discursive nature of truth itself. The truth that Askar perceives by naming Ogaden as Western Somalia is notional and is subject to change. Ogaden may

have cultural domination of Somalis, but nationally it belongs to Ethiopia. Seen from this perspective, Askar, being born as an Ogadenese Somali can never fully attain an authentic Somali identity because he cannot detach himself from his Ethiopian traces. In this regard, when Askar asks Hilaal about the difference between Somali in Somalia and other nations, Hilaal's response that "the Somali in the Ogaden, the Somali in Kenya both, because they lack what makes the self strong and whole, are *unpersons*" justifies the hybrid nature of Askar's identity (167).

This statement in the narrative foils Askar's efforts to essentialise his authentic Somali identity. He cannot attain the inclusive identity of a Somali, and hence will remain an "*unperson*" for the Somalis in the Somali Republic. Hence, in the novel, Farah refuses to privilege a stable national or ethnic identity by withholding Askar's desires to attain it to emphasise "the need to break with the belief in a univocal Somali identity" (Smart 77) in a postcolonial world. Rather, through the manifestation of Askar's shifting identity, he reveals the impossibility of reinserting primordial values and highlights the ambivalence in the identity discourses. The fluidity in Askar's identity has been engendered in the novel through his relationship with his Ethiopian foster-mother Misra. She is the centrifugal force in the novel that destabilises his quest to attain a stable self. Her peripheral life in the Somali community of Ogaden changed from the moment she discovered Askar and became his caretaker. Misra's presence in his life developed an inseparable bond that pervaded Askar's subconscious mind and restrained his attempt to mould himself in the Somali cultural rhetoric. In the novel, Askar himself confessed that Misra's hands were life to him as he described that the moment she lifted and held him, he began to exist: "I was nameless, yes; but I existed the second she touched me" (25). It is interesting to note that Askar, even after coming to terms with his Somali roots acknowledges the significance of Misra as witnessed in the retrospective narration of his childhood. His confession of being in the world the moment she touched him also signifies that Askar can never formulate a separate Somali identity because his very existence is determined by his Ethiopian foster mother. There are frequent references in the novel which emphasise the perpetual experience of Askar's tactile sensation provided by Misra which helped him to

discover himself. The narrator states that Askar feels lost "unless his outstretched hands bring back to his acute senses the reassuring message that" Misra is "*touchably*" there (12). It is stated that Askar ensures his corporeal reality in the world with her "reassuring self." The narrator further manifests Misra's corporeal presence in Askar's life by referring to Misra's hand while describing Askar's biological parents and what they bequeathed to him. The narrator foregrounds the impact of Misra's body on Askar by describing her hand as "a hand to touch, a hand to help and to give assurances" (9). Misra could not provide her maternal milk to Askar, but "...there was plenty of her and she gave it" (10). Misra gave her body to Askar by holding him in proximity to her body, keeping him warm with her cuddles. In fact, we are told that upon Askar's body "were printed impressions of her" (10). There were many instances when Askar felt that he was Misra's "third breast" or "third leg". Moreover, it is stated that Askar may be nourished by the food that the Somali community provided him, but his mind was nourished on "a body of opinion totally her own" (12). It is noteworthy that the Enlightenment idea of distinguishing between mind and body as two separate entities and associating the mind to men and body to women has been questioned in the novel. The enhancement of the body in the novel has moved the body from its peripheral position to a more viable one where mind and body are not two separate entities as forwarded by Descartes's philosophy of mind/body dualism. Rather, as noted by Elizabeth Grosz, there is "inflection of mind into body and body into mind" (Introduction xii). Through Misra's body and its encompassing presence in Askar's life, the novel emphasises the significance of the body because Askar could discern his presence in the world through his somatic interconnection with Misra. Misra's corporeal presence in Askar's life has signified the necessity of forming a balance between mind and body to achieve wholeness. The novel's depiction of the somatic interconnection between Askar and Misra undermines the former's identity as a Somali man who is expected to manifest rationality. In fact, the novel's emphasis that "truth is the body" implicates the prominence of the body in the novel. Farah's enhancement of the functionality of the body is a way to challenge the ideology of man as a rational being, as witnessed in Askar's failed attempts to constitute himself exclusively as one because he cannot detach his corporeal experiences from his mind.

Again, the ritual of circumcision that marks his formal transformation into manhood is agreed upon by him because he desires to be a man. But the novel's reflection on his inner thoughts before and after circumcision also engenders his intrinsic bond with Misra and raises scepticism about his desire to be a man. Undoubtedly, after stepping into manhood, he is entrenched with the idea of proving his manhood through his nationalism, as it is synonymous with valour, courage, honour, and respect. However, he also confesses his concern following the ramifications of circumcision as it will lead to separation from Misra. A series of questions entangled his mind as he contemplated, "Could he undo all the ties which held them together? Could he, like time, sever all their links?" (58) The narrator here describes that Askar's response to these questions manifests his repressed emotions to delay such rituals that separate him from Misra. This is revealed in his utmost wish to hold time like a wet cloth and even wishes that there should be incessant rain so that the cloth never dries. He wishes to suspend time so that "he would not grow up to be a man", only then could he be with Misra. Circumcision is a rite performed by the social institution to virilise men "by stripping them of everything female which may remain in them" (Bourdieu 27). But the novel's meticulous representation of questions that preoccupy Askar's mind related to his separation from Misra and his desires to prevent it raises doubts about his compliance with the traditional norms of masculinity. He may agree to such rituals as it will determine his position in the gender hierarchy, but his compliance is partial because his inner thoughts are in contradiction with his outward action. He fails to perform the ritual accordingly because in this ritual he is supposed to remain untouched even by a female shadow; on the contrary, he breaks the taboo by compelling them to make arrangements for Misra's presence by his side. Even after his circumcision, he confesses to being divided into two—a world with Misra and a world without her. Askar stated that he was able to bear the pain following his circumcision, but the problem arose when pain defined Askar's "state of mind" and his "movements" as well. The societal expectation of manhood makes men compromise with their psychological and physical health as they are born in a world where they are not expected to involve in "sissy stuff" by being affective and sensitive like women, rather they should be stronger, less fragile, and risk-taking. Askar too is conscious of his

masculine image, so he demonstrates his ability to "dwell in the territory of pain" as it will place him in the category of dominant masculinity. However, it is interesting to note that in reality, he hides his pain when people ask him about it by lying that pain has adjusted in his body. He confessed that he hid the truth that the effect of circumcision divided him into two persons. One half belonged to his "vague past" of which Misra was part and he associates it with painlessness. The other half was "represented by the pain which inhabited the groin" (93). Askar's use of the term 'pain' to identify with masculinity brings to light that the attainment of a masculine identity is an arduous task. And the men despite being burdened by the expectations to perform the dominant masculinity strive for it because they are driven by the urge for social acceptance and power. However, Askar's association of Misra with painlessness that formulates his other half connotes his "proximity to Misra, his 'feminine self'" under whose shadow he lived a peaceful life (Cobham 91). Hence, Rhonda Cobham's remark that "Askar's sense of a separate identity is constantly undermined by the long history of his intimacy with Misra which makes it impossible for him to remain untouched by her" is appropriate in this regard (93). As such, Askar, after his socialisation as a Somali man, engages in relentless endeavours to achieve a stable sexual and national identity as rationalised by the Somali society but fails to attain it because he cannot separate Misra from his identity.

Traditional masculinity prevents men from expressing the emotional side of their subjectivity as rationality is considered the cultural ideal of manliness. Victor Siedler, in his book *Man Enough: Embodying Masculinities* discusses how men are brought up in a cultural discourse where they are supposed to "hide and conceal" their emotional wounds and harden themselves as part of "proving their masculinity" (60). According to Siedler, men's social role compels them to repress their emotions and feelings. Undoubtedly, for men to bring an affirmative change in their identity, it is necessary to acknowledge and express the emotional aspect of their subjectivity as it will stimulate the deconstruction of gender hierarchies. However, man's dominant demeanour cannot be exclusively framed as a result of the psychological deficit because the reformulation of men's identities in an affirmative way requires both structural and

psychological change. In the novel, the structural change in Askar's identity comes with his migration to Mogadiscio and his stay with Hilaal and Salaado, that enlightened him about the inauthenticity of the ideologies of gender certitude. Simultaneously, the psychological changes in Askar that affected his perception of dominant masculinity are engendered in the novel through his bond with Misra. It is his emotional bond with Misra that has affected his personality and evoked an existential crisis in him because he can neither detach himself from Misra nor acquire any form of so-called "essentialised" national or gender identity. His childhood intimacies with Misra make his inner self reiterate doubts about his desired subjectivity. This change in Askar made him realise the condition and subjugation of women in the society which even if he wants to overlook to demonstrate his traditional masculinity, he can't because he gets affected by it. Though Askar tried to formulate an image in conformity with the pastoral Somali cultural norms, in reality, he couldn't because he was raised by Misra's body of ideas and lived in the 'inclusive' world of Hilaal and Salaado that made him rethink the position and treatment of women in society. Askar's gender perspectives are in contradiction with the ideals of a traditional Somali patriarchal society that restricts women to the private sphere or normalises sexual and gender-based violence by men or treats women as sexual objects. This transformation in his masculine identity places him in a new kind of masculinity that is not in correspondence with the existing masculine norms. Hence, the novel's depiction of the influence of Misra in his life is a strategy to provoke change in man's perception of gender ideologies and reconstitute their subjectivity through a positive approach. Moreover, the transformation in Askar justifies that masculinity is fluid and not an ontological category, as such allowing subversion of normative gender discourses. Apart from the representation of Misra as an intrinsic force that constrains Askar's endeavour to portray dominant masculinity, the fluid nature of Askar's masculinity is enhanced in the novel by projecting the presence of a woman in Askar. Farah deploys dreams as an instrumental narrative device in manifesting the gender incertitude in the protagonist to implicate the shifting nature of his identity.

One interesting detail about *Maps* is that dreams comprise a major portion of the novel's narrative structure, with three sections portraying a vivid discussion of Askar's dreams and dreaming while six sections consist of dream sequences. The narrative represents swift movements from the conscious to the unconscious realm leading to disjuncture in narrative linearity. This is because the dreams in the narrative open abruptly without any introduction and the scene shifts to the real world without any closure. According to Derek Wright, dreams serve as a postmodern narrative strategy as they "allow very many different competing views to be heard" (qtd. in Mwabu 49). Wright opines that Farah's use of dream motif in the novel is a strategy to issue truth "from the collision of opposing ideas; for truth in Farah's fiction is relative, ambiguous and open-ended" (ibid). Modern-day psychoanalysts like Freud and Jung have also made their observations on the function and content of dreams. They consider dreams to be pivotal as they give insights into the workings of the unconscious. Sigmund Freud emphasised "the interpretation of dreams as the royal road to knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind" (emphasis added 647). Freud argued that dreams are a person's repressed desires and consider them to be the language of the unconscious. He argued that dreams are not a chaotic psychic phenomenon, but are distorted and coded expressions of desires that have to be decoded. While Freud stated that dreams manifest prohibited desires of a person, Jung believed that dreams expressed everything openly. He said that "they do not deceive, they do not lie, they do not distort or disguise...they express something that the ego does not know and does not understand" (103). Jung, in *Civilization in Transition*, defines dream as "impartial, spontaneous products of the unconscious psyche" and produces before us the "unvarnished, natural truth" (149). He considered dreams as a form of compensation for the imbalance created due to the straying of consciousness. Drawing on the above discussion on dreams, this will analyse the significance of dreams in the novel and their relation to Askar's gender identity.

The dreams in *Maps* serve as voices of the protagonist's feelings and experiences and his suppressed sensibilities. Most of the dreams in the novel are centred on the protagonist's quest for identity and the indeterminacy surrounding it. The function of dreams in the novel is

of immense importance as it foregrounds Askar's inner thoughts which manifest the presence of a woman within him. The dream narratives in the novel emphasise the fact that his dreams dressed him up "one day as a woman, another as a man" (66), accentuating gender fluidity. One such dream that reflects Askar's confusion regarding his gender identity is depicted in the third chapter which opens with a dream of Askar running uncertainly without the knowledge or purpose of his run. In the dream, he suddenly stops and turns back when he hears a woman's voice. To Askar, the woman resembled Misra, but she introduced herself as Ummat. Askar, however, was unable to introduce himself as he left the sentence unfinished as "I am" During the journey, he met many people whose bodies were tattooed with identity markers like "their name, nationality, and address" (43). When Askar turned his back to question Misra about these people, he did not find her. She was not even in his memory. And he contemplated that the words "I am ..." which he felt he left unfinished while addressing the woman Ummat maybe was not an incomplete sentence. He then questioned himself if he was Misra. In response to the question, he "heard himself say 'I am'" (44). Askar's identification of himself as a woman—Misra here—can be interpreted as Farah's way of challenging fixities regarding Askar's gender identity. It signifies that Askar cannot form a stable masculine identity in conformity to the existing Somali gender norms. There is another dream in which he envisions that his body has been transformed into a young woman's body. In the dream, Askar contemplated his lost identity through his remarks that he was once a young man but had lost his identity as he had transformed into a young woman. The narrator here comments on the ambiguity concerning Askar's identity as he "becomes now a man, now a woman" (63). The dream reflects Askar's fragmented identity and his affliction to attain wholeness. The above dreams are a reflection of the complexity of formulating an authentic masculine identity as it denotes the mutable nature of identity itself. Askar's dreams of transforming into a woman or his confusion if he is Misra signifies that he does not have an authentic masculine self because his dreams frequently implicate the presence of an unconscious feminine self. The presence of a feminine self in his unconscious realm denotes that masculine identity is not stable or given. According to Jung, dream is a "self-reflection," and can be perceived as a "communication or

message from the unconscious" (149). Keeping in with Jung's view, Askar's dreams are a reflection of his inner turmoil as it depicts his inability to stabilise his identity. It is not only in dreams that Askar feels the presence of a woman in him, even in his conscious state he senses the female self in him. This is witnessed in the episode when Askar tells Hilaal about Misra. During the conversation, he told Hilaal that:

Although, now and again, I have a strange feeling that there is *another* in me,
one older than I—a woman. I have the conscious feeling of being spoken through, if you know what I mean. I feel as if I have allowed a woman older than
I live inside of me, and I speak not my words, my ideas, but hers. And during
the time I am spoken through, as it were, I am she—not I.
(Farah 151)

Askar also confessed to Hilaal that he could not part with the woman in him as it would cause him pain. This is because he has allowed her to dwell in him. The confusion regarding his gender identity and national identity leads to the recurrence of the pertinent question "Who is Askar?" till the end of the novel. In the novel, the psychological burden that Askar experiences concerning his performance of dominant masculinity are the recurring feeling of the presence of a woman within him. It is this inner voice that enhances the fluid nature of his identity that pervades his attempt to configure a stable masculine identity. Despite being unable to perform the dominant Somali masculinity, Askar tries to reinforce it so that he can attain power, respect, and acceptance in the community. He does not want to accept his alternative masculinity due to fear of acceptance in his society which leads to inner turmoil in him. He constantly attempts to live up to the ideals and norms set for being a 'real man' to receive the approval of his community. He feels that if he acknowledges the changing masculinity in him, it will lead to the betrayal of his Somali identity that fosters essentialism rather than hybridity. However, with new experiences, he cannot formulate his identity in existing images of masculinity because the new experiences threaten his prior social underpinnings of gender

hierarchy. Askar's emphasis on being a man or his rigorous attempt to discard the presence of a woman within him or to get rid of Misra's influence from the deep recesses of his mind is due to the "wretched fear of not being male enough, which is identical with the fear of 'femininity—and hence of weakness, dependence, intimacy and closeness" (Segal 260). The fear of not being seen as a man is related to power because the patriarchal structure makes power synonymous with masculine identity. Askar too is trapped in this power politics as he does not want to be identified as a 'lack.' This is because the traditional Somali society terms those men who are incapable of performing their roles correctly as fragile and feminine.

One of the reasons for men's concern with their social appearance is the panoptic effect of patriarchy that gets deeply entrenched in an individual's mind. The panoptic effect of patriarchy can be perceived by understanding Jeremy Bentham's concept of the panopticon. Bentham, in the eighteenth century, designed the panopticon as a penitentiary model to regulate and control the prisoners. The core idea of the panopticon was to allow the prisoners of an institution to be under the surveillance of a single security guard positioned at the central tower. The cellmates are put in individual cells, and with the effect of backlighting, they are constantly observed by the eye of the supervisor. Foucault further adds that in the panopticon the supervisor can observe each individual but the cellmates cannot see each other. He says that "the individual is seen but he does not see", the individual is the "object of information", not the "subject in communication" (200). According to Foucault, one of the core effects of the Panopticon is to "induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that ensures the automatic functioning of power" (201). As the cellmates are confused about the position of the watcher and their monitoring, they begin to self-regulate themselves, leading to the desired effect of the model. Hence, the panopticon was successful in observing and regulating the behaviour of the cellmates through involuntary surveillance. David Buchbinder draws similarities between the working of the panopticon model to the functioning of patriarchy as he identifies patriarchy as a form of the panopticon. According to him, a man's position in the patriarchal order is not identified by a woman but by determining his position alongside other men because within the order, "it follows that his

attempt to do so is both monitored and evaluated by other men, which in turn affords them considerable power over him" (Farah 79). Thus, a man's criteria of fulfilling his masculinity requirements depend on other men's judgment of him as masculine or not masculine. This leads to constant pressure among men to monitor their performance of masculinity as there is fear of rejection for not performing one's gender correctly. The omnipresent power of patriarchy that burdens the individual to regulate and monitor their own gender identity can be found in *Maps* as well. In the novel, this is determined through Askar's behaviour as he self-monitors his manhood by a certain culturally identified marker of masculinity.

One such instance in the novel is when Askar's mirror serves as an instrument for observing Askar's manhood. Askar notes that the mirrors "reflect *his* visage, showing *him* whether or not *he has* grown a beard" (emphasis added 19). The narrator recalls how Askar thinks that his beard is the indicator of his manliness, and he wants to ensure whether "Karin's menopausal hair is manlier" than his, and if her hair is manlier, "then it is high time *to do* something about it" (emphasis added 19). The cultural discourse of different cultures constructs certain markers of the body as indicators of one's masculinity or femininity. In many cultures, the beard is validated as a marker of one's masculinity. This marker of masculinity is ingrained in Askar's mind and he becomes the observer of his manliness and the mirror becomes instrumental in monitoring his masculinity. Thus, in this regard, the imagery of the mirror here is significant as it foregrounds the dynamics of the watcher and the watched "as a way of keeping male behaviour in line with the current norms of masculinity and accepted gender standards" (Buchbinder 81). Somali ethnocentric nationalism too has a panoptic effect in Askar's mind because in the novel, no one pressurises him to join the Somali Liberation War Front but he convinces himself that this is the only way to reinforce his identity as a Somali man. He feels that only through his nationalism he can prove his masculinity and he measures his masculine nationalism alongside Armadio and his father. Askar's behaviour can be read in the light of Michael Kimmel's statement that the way "gender shapes sexuality, sexuality confirms gender" (19). Askar's constant reminder to himself that he needs to recruit himself as a soldier to reintegrate his Somali identity is one such way to stabilise

his sexuality as a male. Askar construed that nationalism may help him boost his masculinity and hide his female side. The involuntary power exercised by patriarchal society is such that Askar becomes his own moral police because he believes that he is betraying his community by not conforming to the ideals laid by it. He wants to join the Front so that "he would wash clean his conscience—and live at peace with it" (Farah 56).

Moreover, it is the desired effect of the patriarchal panopticon that he does not want to acknowledge the presence of a woman in him or publicly acknowledge Misra's presence in his life as it will obstruct his "ways of gaining and keeping respect and power" (Berg 224). He is obsessed with being a man and constantly strives to perform his masculinity as per the prescribed norms because he fears loss of power and respect if he accepts his subordinate masculinity. Michael Kimmel observes that this "fear of failing" should be the core concern of masculinity studies as it has a prolonged psychological effect on men. The psychological effect of living up to the ideals of normative masculinity is such that Askar tells Misra that he has to kill her to live in this world as a man. He tells her, "When I grow up and I become a man... 'I will kill you'...to live I have to kill you" (Farah 58). This sentence has been interpreted to connote Misra's Ethiopian identity which can never be infused with Askar's Somali identity. But the sentence's emphasis on "as a man" can be interpreted from the perspective of Askar's gender identity. He has to get rid of everything that is not in conjunction with existing norms of masculinity. After all, Misra's presence in his life will enhance his female side. To achieve mastery over his masculine self and display it as his authentic identity, he undertakes self-vigilance, as reflected in the episode when Askar was shocked that he allowed his other selves to "study the activities, thoughts of his primary self" (Farah 70). Askar's concern for social appearance is highlighted in one of his dreams as well. On his journey to Mogadiscio, Askar dreams of meeting a girl who has no name or country to identify herself with. When Askar inquires her if she has anything that belongs to her, she answers that her shadow is the only thing she claims to be her own. During the conversation, the girl criticises Askar for being concerned only about his social image. She says that he never introspects and characterises him as a "smooth surface being" who is "almost always

satisfied with the surface of things" (Farah 132). Askar prefers to mark his identity only by the reflection of his physical appearance in the mirror because his external image reflects his masculinity. On the other hand, his inner self frequently resonates with a feminine presence in him which disrupts his performance of dominant masculinity. The novel's continuous manifestation of Askar's inner self is to present the fragmentation of his identity.

In the novel, Askar relentlessly attempts to get rid of the "abject" (feminine) within him to conform to dominant Somali masculinity. However, the narrative impedes Askar's attempt by representing the feminine as an intrinsic part of his identity. He fails to perform dominant masculinity because he cannot discard the female presence in him manifested by his inner thoughts and feelings. Though Askar tries to reinforce his masculine identity the representation of his inner conflict also foregrounds his longing for a fluid identity rather than rigid markers of identity. This is witnessed in the narrator's expression of Askar's suppressed feelings, "If only there were no mirror to divulge the secrets of your inner torments; if the two of you could touch each other in the dark; ... if each could fabricate a story which would go well with the identity you wished to assume" (Farah 62). These thoughts express Askar's desire to lead a life that does not restrict one to transgress boundaries and exercise their free will. However, he fails to acknowledge the fluidity in his identity as he keeps working to reinforce the norms that govern his masculinity and fails to see that the "hegemony *he is* upholding is an illusion" (emphasis added, Berg 251). The novel portrays Askar as a torn self who remains preoccupied with an existential dilemma. This can be interpreted as Farah's opposition to supporting any form of essentialist discourse. Thus, the novel, by precluding Askar from attaining any form of exclusive identity, illuminates the unstable and discursive nature of identity: gender and national, respectively.

Works Cited

Berg, Lovisa. *Creating a Man, a Mouse, or a Monster: Masculinity as Formulated by Syrian Female Novelists through the Second Half of the 20th Century*. 2016. U of Edinburg, PhD Thesis.

- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Masculine Domination*. Translated by Richard Nice, Stanford UP, 2001.
- Buchbinder, David. *Studying Men and Masculinities*. Routledge, 2013.
- Butler, Christopher. *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford UP, 2002.
- Cobham, Rhonda. "Boundaries of the Nation: Boundaries of the Self: African Nationalist Fictions and Nuruddin Farah's 'Maps.'" *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1991, pp. 83–98.
- Farah, Nuruddin. *Maps*. Penguin Books, 1986.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, Vintage Books, 1995.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Translated and edited by James Strachey, Avon Books, 1998.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. Introduction. *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism*. Indiana UP, 1994.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. Routledge, 1988.
- Jung, Carl Gustav. *Civilisation in Transition: The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*. Translated by R. F. C. Hull, edited by Sir Herbert Read et al., 2nd ed., vol 10, Princeton UP, 1970.
- . *The Development of Personality: The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*. Translated by R. F. C. Hull, edited by Sir Herbert Read et al., 4th ed., vol 17, Princeton UP, 1974.
- Kimmel, Michael. "Rethinking 'Masculinity': New Directions in Research." *Changing Men: New Directions in Research on Men and Masculinities*, edited by Michael S. Kimmel, SAGE Publications, 1987.
- Mehrabi, Bahar, and Nasser Maleki. "The Sense of Loss: Postmodern Fragmented Identity in Three Plays of Sam Shepard." *Journal of Research in Applied Linguistics*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2010, pp. 101-114.
- Mwabu, Samuel Mutugi. *Fragmentation as an Allegory of the Somali Nation in Nuruddin Farah's Maps*. 2019. U of Nairobi, MA Thesis.
- Pilcher, Jane, and Imelda Whelehan. *Fifty Key Concepts in Gender Studies*. SAGE Publications, 2004.
- Reeser, Todd. *Masculinities in Theory: An Introduction*. Blackwell Publishing, 2010.
- Siedler, Victor Jeleniewski. *Man Enough: Embodying Masculinities*. SAGE Publications, 1997.
- Smart, Francis Ngaboh. "Nationalism and the Aporia of National Identity." *Research in African Literature*, vol. 32, no.3, 2001, pp. 86-102.
- Sugnet, Charles. "Nuruddin Farah's Maps: Deterritorialization and 'The Postmodern'." *World Literature Today*, vol. 72, no. 4, 1998, pp. 739-746.



Lesbian Poetics of Intimacy: A Study of Homoeroticism and Sexual Subjectivity on Instagram

Ishani Saha*

Abstract

The modern society of the twentieth century has vouched for a kind of exhilaration of lesbian subjective reflex with the hand of some professional female photographers. These female subjective expressions are enhanced to move into indubitable and subtle details with the advent of a technological boon: social media. Instagram is one of the digitally available visual media helping to communicate sexual and gender identities. It has an abundance of spectacles and firsthand expressions of LGBTQ experiences. This paper will examine the visual media, Instagram, and its relation to homoerotic subjectivities. It will explore the role of this kind of digital representation and visual codes in connection with lesbian desire, identity and intimacy. My study will delve deeper into the already 'visible' lesbians' bodily experiences on Instagram and explore the inevitable interaction between digital space, the female body, semiotics, feminism, and queer-subjectivity.

Keywords: female homoeroticism, psychoanalysis, feminism, photography, Instagram, visual semiotics.

Introduction

Female homoeroticism was an essential manifestation of the ancient social structure. They found expression through sculptures of vases, polychrome plates and other performative visuals in public surroundings. Due to religious, cultural and social prohibitions, female homosexuality failed to get a discursive place in dominant discourses after Sappho, Alcman and other unknown poets of the seventh century BCE. A later depiction of erotic desire between women began in the nineteenth century in the hands of painters and male illustrators, providing explicit visuals of naked lesbians but

* Junior Research Fellow in the Department of English at Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University.

these are heavily burdened with the male point of view. Japanese erotic art is one of the supreme examples of these. In the modern technology of the digital era, lesbian erotic gets a new dimension at the hand of female photographers like Nancy Goldin, Tee A. Corinne and Judy Francesconi. They started to claim the subjective position of lesbians in their photographs on lesbian eroticism and lifestyle. Advanced technology helps minor sexualities to communicate their own identity by themselves on various platforms, digitally available to everybody. Instagram is one of those popular social media spaces which offer the virtual scope to generate firsthand queer experiences without the intervention of mainstream media and its reinterpretation of minorities on the ground of gender and sexuality. This undeniable scope of self-representation by lesbian women on Instagram shows up another segment of its artistic and aesthetic site of female vision, which altogether turns up a potentially political and poetical sight.

Against this backdrop, this paper attempts to examine this resourceful side of visual media, specifically Instagram and its relation to homoerotic subjectivities. It will explore the role of semiotics in this kind of digital representation in connection with lesbian desire, identity and intimacy. Further, it is to recognise lesbian poetics on the visual platform of Instagram. The paper incorporates the interplay of psychoanalytic French feminism and visual semiotics to critically observe and reinvent the philosophical possibilities behind the essential ontological enquiry into female sexuality/subjectivity.

Female Body and Sexual Visibility: Dominant Discourse on Sexuality

There is an egregious probability of sexual objectification when it comes to the visual/visibility of the female sexual self. Female homoeroticism is at stake in the dominant discursive field of visibility. It has undergone a potential paradoxical situation where, on the one hand, visual texts have been primordial and have presented a potential way of coming out of the closet. On the other hand, it relegates the female homosexual body to sexual exploitation and objectification to ascertain ideological catastrophe. This domain of argument on visibility/visual and its relation to identity and sexual difference foregrounds the psychoanalytic discourses. Sigmund

Freud propagated the theories of sexuality, prioritising the 'sight' in the enactment and formation of social identity, which assures a perpetual 'lack' of the female body. However, within the Lacanian system, this 'lack' is further engraved to recognise women as a mere sign of difference. The amalgamation of the symbolic order or language and sexuality flared the intellectual move to eradicate female subjectivity.

Rewriting of Female Body: A Feminist Discourse on Female Sexuality

Lacanian and Freudian theories of psychoanalysis have certain implications for future feminist critiques, regarded as post-structuralist and post-Lacanian feminist theories for having deconstructed and reinvestigated the female body within the frame of the unconscious. The two French feminist thinkers and theorists, Luce Irigaray and Helen Cixous, have approached the female body in intriguing ways. Irigaray critiques the fundamental pillars, castration, "penis envy", phallocentrism of Western psychoanalytic theory and describes feminine sexuality as fluid and polymorphous. Likewise, Helen Cixous challenges the representation of the female body and female sexuality in the dominant discourse of psychoanalysis as "dark continent" and rejuvenates the territory of self-exploration as "newly born woman". She talks about writing the body with the feminine libidinal economy. Thus, they differ from the historical and sociocultural representation of the female body and sexuality which is largely ruled by 'sight' and they communicate the female body and its qualities of 'tangibility' as a gateway to enter into the new realm of imagining female language for the upcoming discourse on female sexual realities at large.

Visual World of the Digital Era and Female Body

The contemporary era is largely governed by digitalisation and the increasingly indispensable Internet, along with its inseparable dimension of virtual entertainment, which gradually displaces the mainstream sources of entertainment at large. The world implies sight as a primary sense in the domain of communication and comprehension. The impeccable growth of AI contributes to this worldwide engagement in visual cues. The invention of mobile 4G

and faster internet access through smartphones has been largely responsible for turning visual media into a norm in communication. The widely used smartphones have simplified visual creation and online distribution to assert and flaunt self-representation. By the same token, it has brought back the effective play of phallic 'sight' in the public domain of comprehending the world around. This has also generated the primordial risk for women to become prey to patriarchal ideology and gendered ways of understanding the sexual body. The power of masculinity comes from the 'vision' which demarcates their sexual difference and generates their power while subordinating the female body (whose visibility confirms 'the lack'). Nonetheless, embarking on the other side of the same coin, the sight of the female body is indispensable in the representation of female sexuality to constitute an altogether new definition of 'sight' through 'tangibility'/ vision. Hence visual material is the ultimate source to resist and explore the new possible light of interpretation. This paradoxical situation has supplied the significant demand to investigate the possible involvement of the French feminist approach in soaring visual texts of social media by demarcating the 'newly born woman' in the new era of the twenty-first century.

Instagram: The Popular Photo-Sharing Social Media Platform

Now the truth is not unified: 'One' when it comes to sexuality and desire, but diverse and heterogeneous, enhanced and liberated through social media — Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etcetera. Reporter Sarah Frier in her book *No Filter: The Inside Story of Instagram*, writes, "If Facebook was about friendship, and Twitter was about opinions, Instagram was about experience...and *anyone* could be interested in anyone else's virtual experiences, anywhere in the world" (45). Visual texts, like photographs, are important as their coded reality differs from filmic reality. Instagram is a well-known photo-sharing application with exceptional quality for organising mobile photographs or short clips into one. Instagram is more suitable for consideration for two reasons. First, it prioritises the visual texts, and second, it is the platform of personal interpretation and representation of self and body, which might contribute to the storehouse of 'femaleness' through the visual representation of the lesbian female body. Thus, it becomes a significant and necessary

area to reinvestigate the contemporary visual appeal of the female body from different feminist angles to subvert the ideological interpretation.

Survey of Literature

Marika Skowronski and Robert Busching (2021), in their research article, have discussed the exposure of sexualised images to adolescent Instagram users and its effective influence on their self-objectification. Karina Sokolova, Hayer Kefi and Vincent Dutot (2022) have illuminated that “. . . highly visual social media platforms such as Instagram, Body image exposure has become a common practice” (1). Women's bodies, physical attractiveness and potential objectification, have become a natural and obvious phenomenon to Instagram users. Marika Tiggemann and Isabella Barbato (2018) have mentioned how Instagram images of women's bodies lead to Instagram imagery and body dissatisfaction in teenagers. Also, Francesca Guizzo (2021) has commenced with a similar social issue of Instagram sexualisation and participants' body dissatisfaction limited to a particular geographical space. Jessica Cwyner-hora (2016), in her thesis, sheds light on social media platforms like Instagram, which have enabled women to present themselves outside of any conventional and stereotypical gender normative criteria of feminine beauty by conducting a survey-based study. Sofia P. Calderia (2018) directed a case study of Marisa Papen and concluded that self-representation on Instagram can re-appropriate the normative gender role. While Paul Ayodele Onanuga (2022) talks about Black queer women on Instagram for the proliferation of their visibility on the ground of sexuality and gender, Stefanie Duguay (2019) has identified the tension between self-commodification and representation of sexual minorities. The existing research, publications and monographs have largely highlighted the social issues of female body exposure on Instagram and its effect on adolescents and teenagers and how it is enhancing body discrimination and dissatisfaction among the woman users. The survey of the available literature helped me to comprehend how Instagram has become sexualised and objectification has become a norm nowadays. Though literary critiques have delved deeper into the feminist perspective of looking into female body image on

Instagram as a step towards non-normative body representation, some articles have generated the risk of being re-appropriated into a normative gender role. Other research related to queer woman and Instagram have talked about how queer women are benefitting, economically and socially, by self-commodification through their Instagram accounts, how the platform is helping a black homosexual woman in their visibility, and some case study of lesbian athletes and their lifestyles has also been the subject of analysis. But they fail to address the female body of queer, lesbian women and their self-representation against the backdrop of erotic gesture and sexual subjectivity.

Research Questions

As the existing feminist scholarship and research is almost silent on the issue of female homoerotic subjectivity on the ground of lesbian poetics, the study wants to investigate and answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the forms and patterns of signs engaged in exhibiting the female homoerotic phenomena on popular lesbian Instagram accounts?

RQ2: How do they contribute to enriching the lesbian desire, intimacy and identity, breaking away from the frame of heteronormative sexualisation?

Research Methodology

The article has progressed with a qualitative study and observation of the visual content of select Instagram posts with the incorporation of the theoretical tools that subsume Helen Cixous' concept of 'female imaginary', 'écriture feminine', her influential views on 'castration'. On the other hand, I have also taken into consideration the premises given by Luce Irigaray in her work "This Sex Which Is Not One" (1977), *Speculum of Other Woman* (1974) and "When Our Lips Speak Together" (1980) to proliferate the understanding of female subjectivity and their sexual desire. The semiotic dimension will enable a deeper insight into the patterns and forms of lesbian sexual

self-expression and will help in decoding the photographs and their mise-en-scene into a meaningful rack.

Sample Selection

The efficacy of Social Networking sites is thwarted by the drawback of increasing threats like false information and increasing fake accounts on Instagram. As a matter of fact, to maintain the validity and avoid fake accounts, I have to conduct a purposive sampling method in the selection of Instagram pages by keeping in mind several numbers of factors such as the number of posts and their consistency, number of followers and following-follower relationship. I have chosen four lesbian Instagram handles - @sarah and kokebnesh, @janineandgen, @emxsofi, @julia and diana. These are some popularly followed lesbian accounts, with a minimum of fifteen thousand followers and up to ninety-six thousand followers. They are consistent in updating their self in this visual and graphic space. For this proposed study, I have adopted the 'stratified random sampling' method to choose the samples in which the select lesbian accounts' photographs are subdivided into two strata based on their contents for analysis. The two groups are one, showing no sexual explicitness or nudity of the lesbian body, and the second, showing physical and sexual assertiveness towards each other. Three representative photographs are identified and extracted from these respective strata for observation and analysis.

1. First Category: The Less Sexually Explicit Photographs

1.1. How the Vision is Embodied

There is a significant difference between Irigaray and the dominant discourse on vision, accentuated by Platonic philosophy. Vision is interdependent and circumscribed within the periphery of the seer and the object of sight. Irigaray has advocated for a Vision, liberating it from the restraint of sight to touch. She said in her book, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, "But of a vision in between the diurnal and the nocturnal in its touch" (153). Fig. 1 has generated that possible feminine vision. The image has framed two lesbians in a natural backdrop. The spectacular sight is evoked through the obscure natural background and the spotlight of the sun on their physique and

gestural expression. Their manipulative clothing strategy produces a mirror effect of reflecting each other. The natural light illuminates the frame, which is the source of the orange shade in the visual, providing smoothening effect on the skin. Hence, it contributes to conventional beauty and also subverted the feminine vision of touch. They are captured as embracing each other while one of them places her hand on her partner's chest. The posture and the sunlight interconnectedly constitute bodily closeness and assert their desire, passion and sexual engagement in the preferable background. In this particular image (Fig. 1), 'The light on the too close chests' conveys the symbolic signification of the metaphorical gateway to a certain resonant 'vision' through 'tangibility', which is prior to looking. 'Looking' is underestimated by their closed eyes. This vision is pre-symbolic and feminine. It has reinstated the 'female Imaginary'. By the same token, we can draw the sensual qualities of the image which is being produced by the proximity of skin. The two pairs of eyes are lined up in symmetrical order, and each is answering another's call of involvement. The sharp nose foregrounds erection and a medium to touch another woman. In that way, the 'vision' is multiplied, and these are embodied not by the eyes but by several 'touches' and 'touched'.



Fig. 1. Blissful Female Intimacy (Julia & Diana).

1.2. Renouncing Castration

Castration has been the centre of argument and one of the crucial phenomena often referred to in feminine discourse. In this regard,

Helen Cixous had a particular impact in acknowledging the importance of the female body and in resistance to the male power towards the female body. For Cixous, the female body is a medium of discourse. She asserts in her influential essay, "The Laugh of Medusa", that a woman could write or construct *Écriture Feminine* by writing in "white ink" (881). This analytic framework and Helen Cixous's notion of "writing in white ink" enable a woman to become a signifier (instead of a signifier of lack) of another woman on a metaphorical level "Woman must write woman" (887). This feminine writing mirrors her own body and sexuality. This precise demarcation of the feminine quest of writing has been used to communicate the textual strategies in the image (Fig. 2). The image has framed the private space, the bathroom, where the two female bodies are captured in a 'new' white bathrobe. The frame contains no dark side and is well illuminated with natural light and bright-colour preference. Their gesture appeals to playfulness, signified through their giggling eyes and smiling facial expressions. Further, this 'laughing face' of each woman could be regarded as an exercise of Cixous's rewriting of the myth 'Laugh of Medusa' as it holds the power to dismantle the male economy of Castration anxiety, looking straight to the 'phallic lens' without any guilt or shame. Thus, they accomplished the writing of a woman's body, desire and sexuality with the 'white ink', which is emphasised in both symbolical and metaphorical levels on the screen to generate the "new woman" (Cixous 878). Hence, this particular picture connotes a high resonance of power and authority, deflecting from the quite visible white bodies.



Fig. 2. Valentine Spa Day (Janine & Gen).

1.3. Redefines the 'Lack' of Female Body as 'Full'

Freudian conviction of the penis as the only sex organ presupposes that sexuality is controlled by men. This overvaluation of 'penis' and 'sight' as sexual is evident in his book *Sexuality and The Psychology of Love*, where he states that "they (girls) notice the penis of a brother or playmate, strikingly visible and of large proportions, at once recognise it as the superior counterpart of their own small and inconspicuous organ, and from that time forward fall victim to envy for the penis" (177). According to Helen Cixous, this exaggeration of male sexual supremacy has relegated a woman's life to the banks of 'lack'; an unexplored dark continent. She also indicates that women could challenge this 'truth' by breaking the dominant sexual codes. Against this backdrop, Fig. 3 has permitted several codes and signs, unlike the phallogentric order of reality, to strengthen body writing and enable women's bodies to be heard. The image (fig. 3) has configured two lesbian women sitting on the bank of a river, embracing each other with a 'cross-legged' posture. This 'cross-legged' visual reveals and conceals the 'dark continent' (the possible sight of uncanny/castration). Nevertheless, this conventional 'lack' turns out to be a source of strength as it mirrors the desire of another half (another woman's vagina). Facing each other's lack is a way to inscribe the moment of 'fullness' of female sexual possibility, which is implied by this particular lesbian posture. Thus, the lack is

deconstructed into 'fullness'. The dismal 'void' in between them seems to be the magnetic field, fluid, mobile and energetic. This sensual, energetic expression is engraved by the mise-en-scène; the water body ('Lake full of water' is a symbol of fluidity and femininity) and the reflection of red sunlight on the river bed constitutes the passionate flow of feminine fluidity. Hence, the image (Fig. 3) has penetrated the homoerotic essence of the female body, its passion and the eccentric nature of sexual expressions.

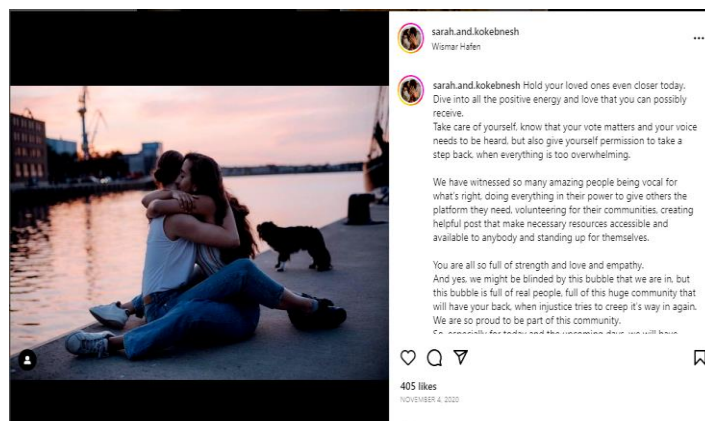


Fig. 3. Feminine Embrace (Sarah & Kokebnesh).

2. Second Category: Sexually Explicit Photographs

2.1. The Feminine Erogenous Zones

Luce Irigaray points out in her essay, "This Sex Which Is Not One", "But the woman has sex organs more or less everywhere. She finds pleasure almost anywhere" (28). Irigaray's premises on female sexual pleasure have impeccable space in the advocacy of the lesbian pleasure economy. The photograph (Fig. 4) has subscribed to that irreducible erotic sensory pleasure between two women. It has framed two female figures exposing their body in black swimsuits surrounded by water in a pool from head height. The Sunbeam is flashing in the background and on the faces of women, partially. The frame is shortened from the lower portion to feature the waist-up body intimacy against the natural backdrop with plenty of greenery and overemphasised by banana leaves hanging over the pool. In the

picture (Fig. 4), one woman is embracing another from the back, making one's skin touch the other's skin, and the facial emotion is implied through the close contact of their faces and their closed eyes. This exposure to the female body accounted for the feminine value of 'touch', which amplifies their embracing stature to the experience of pleasure hailed by their facial expression.

This inscribed phenomenon of female pleasure is empowered with the selection of lots of natural elements like water, trees and the ultimate blue sky, peeping in between the trees. Nature is closely linked to female sexuality beyond any phallic order of society. The nature of water is itself very intimate as it connects the bodies into it through its waves. It constantly touches the skin of each body into it and provides the sensation which reaches the depth of the inner realm of wonder. Water reflects auto-erotic vibrations that resemble female sexual 'multiplicity', which is magnified in lesbianism. Thus, water and its metaphorical relation with a woman's body on the base of 'touching from within' are interwoven in this particular picture. At the same time, the water body has symbolical significance in regard to women as both connotes fluidity itself.



Fig. 4. Water Intimacy (Sofi and Em).

2.2. Body as Political Weapon

The next photo (Fig. 5) from @sarah.and.kokebnesh, is a low-key image that frames two lesbians sitting face to face and kissing each other. The setting seems to be a platform, having some seating arrangements and big windows in the background. The background is out of focus with no props, which allows the focus only on the two figures. It also enforces the calmness of the place and the sexually active flow of energy of the female figure. The big iron bars, making a big cross in the background, presents a strong contrast with the partly red faces of lesbian, brushing their lips against each other with crossed hands, holding each other by the neckline. The material expression of the obscure big Cross is symbolic of the phallogocentric society and its heteronormative roles and regulation, which they leave behind. The red complexion of the two intimate faces implies their passion and love. Their crossed hands are displacing the Cross Bars of inhibition with acceptance of the love of the same. As Helen Cixous, in her essay "Laugh of Medusa", remarks: "To write and thus to forge for herself the antilogos weapon. To become *at will* the taker and initiator, for her own right, in every symbolic system, in every political process" (880). She emphasises the logic of female body speech to ground the feminine language; ". . . its with her body . . . the "logic" of her speech. Her flesh speaks true" (882). Hence, the entire self-representation of the lesbian in this picture is challenging the absolute power of society and establishes homoerotic values and love.



Fig. 5. Women Kissing Each Other (Sarah & Kokebnesh).

2.3. Diffusing the Binary Order

In *Speculum of Other Woman*, Irigaray talks about the concaved mirror or the curved mirror, which is different from the flat mirror. Unlike a flat mirror, which reflects the male economy of sameness, a curved mirror helps women with the looking glass to look at themselves to anticipate woman's self-representation. The final picture (Fig. 6) incorporates the curved mirror strategy. The picture represents two women lying on the bed in casual clothing from head height. The two figures facing each other, cross-legged and cross-arms make a rhythm of an illusion of sameness. But this sameness is neither 'one' nor 'two'. This value of such illusion is increased by their pose, posture and by their essential female body. It could be considered an aesthetic arrangement put forward. The texture of the picture is smoothened with the artificial lights of the bedroom and the sober colour preferences of the materials. The exposure of the orange tone constitutes the warmth that is enhanced by the comfort level implied by their relaxed bodies on the cosy bed. The meticulous detail of their hair, facial expression, and kinesics of hands provides its audience to breathe the same air as this picture. The sensuality is implied through the touch of the fingers of one of them on the other's neck. Their closed eyes and the closely de-touched lips make a void in between the lips, which they are filling with the breath of their sensually aroused body. The void is also inscribed metaphorically by the book cover containing a picture of two hands, close to holding tight. It is placed by the side of the head in a lateral position with the lips. This lateral rhythm of a void between the lips and between the hands in the cover is indeed their area of jouissance which they are living within the space of the frame. Thus, they are diffusing the binary of self-other and enabling the mirroring of looking into the same other by means of their desire and pleasure. This phenomenon makes every touch sexual regardless of the unitary idea of an erogenous zone.



Fig. 6. Cosy Bed Intimacy (Sofi and Em).

Conclusion

Regardless of the sexual explicitness, the self-representation of lesbian female bodies on Instagram has several common gestures when it comes to expressing feminine desire, intimacy and sexuality. Such forms include woman-to-woman interactions in which tangibility plays a vital role in communicating non-verbal emotions between the women. The body remains the leading head in speaking the unheard sensual commitments. Ordinary affairs of 'kissing' and 'embracing' are elevated into multi-layered and non-registered sign-system. Innovative, playful creative touch is accountable in each representative image of the study, among which closed eyes, cross-legged and cross-arms are recurrent phenomena in lesbian erotic expression. This has finely established the feminine economy of imaginary, 'woman imaginary'. By the same token, they have successfully accomplished female 'vision' through 'tangibility' which advanced a new realm of body-writing. On the other hand, these female homoerotic expressions contribute to redefining the female 'lack' into 'fullness'; the deep repository of potency. The binary distinction of self-other dissolves through the ultimate reflection of self into another woman. This has failed the phallogentric order of the symbolic reality of sexuality and fostered the domain of female sexual fluidity. Thus, the study has constituted the poetics of female

homoerotics, encouraging the political and aesthetic dimension of the female body.

Works Cited

Primary Sources:

- Sarah & Kokebnesh [@sarah.and.kokebnesh]. Photo of Women Kissing Each Other. *Instagram*, 23 May. 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CAiiwyHKZEo/?igshid=MTc4MmM1YmI2Ng==>
- Sofi and Em [@emxsofi]. Photo of Water Intimacy. *Instagram*, 8 Jan. 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CnJj8pdNNx-/?igshid=MTc4MmM1YmI2Ng%3D%3D>
- Janine & Gen / LGBTQ travel [@janineandgen]. Photo of Valentine Spa Day. *Instagram*, 7 Feb. 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CoXkiYjpyPZ/?igshid=MTc4MmM1YmI2Ng==>
- Julia & Diana Travel/Vegan/Love [@julia.and.diana_]. Photo of Blissful Female Intimacy. *Instagram*, 8 Feb. 2023, https://www.instagram.com/p/CoZjbxDBnW_/?igshid=MTc4MmM1YmI2Ng==
- Sarah & Kokebnesh [@sarah.and.kokebnesh]. Photo of Feminine Embrace. *Instagram*, 4 Nov. 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CHJKmpgh2R0/?igshid=MTc4MmM1YmI2Ng==>
- Sofi and Em [@emxsofi]. Photo of Cosy Bed Intimacy. *Instagram*, 13 Sept. 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CicCPp-NHXb/?igshid=MTc4MmM1YmI2Ng==>

Secondary Sources:

- Blyth, Ian, and Susan Sellers. *Helen Cixous: Live Theory*. London: Continuum, 2004.
- Calderia, Sofia P, et al. "Exploring the Politics of Gender Representation on Instagram Self-Representation of Femininity." *DiGeSt. Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2018, pp. 23–42.
- Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *The University of Chicago Press*, translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976, pp. 875–893.
- Cummings, Jessica Mary Elsie. *The Effect(s) of the Visual Media upon Female Body Image*. 1998. U of Windsor, Ph.D dissertations.
- Cwyner-Horta, Jessica. *Documenting Femininity: Body Positivity and Female Empowerment on Instagram*. 2016. York U, Ph.D dissertations.
- Duguay, Stefanie. "'Running the Numbers': Modes of Microcelebrity Labor in Queer Women's Self-Representation on Instagram and Vine." *Social Media + Society*, vol. 5, no. 3, Oct. 2019, pp. 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119894002>.

- Freud, Sigmund, et al. "Female Sexuality." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, edited by James Strachey, XXI, Hogarth Press, 1927, pp. 221–244.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Sexuality and The Psychology of Love*. Simon and Schuster Inc., 1997.
- Frier, Sarah. *No Filter: The Inside Story of Instagram*. Simon & Schuster, 2020.
- Gor, Ritu Atulbhai. "Objectification of Woman in Media." *International Journal of Research in All Subjects in Multi Languages*, vol. 6, no. 3, Mar. 2018, pp. 84–87.
- GU, Keping. "The Female Sex: Irigaray's Critique of Freud and Plato." *Comparative Literature: East & West*, 6 Aug. 2018, pp. 44–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25723618.2009.12015365>.
- Guizzo, Francesca, et al. "Instagram Sexualization: When Posts Make You Feel Dissatisfied and Wanting to Change Your Body ." *Body Image*, vol. 39, June 2021, pp. 62–67, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2021.06.005>.
- Irigaray, Luce. "This Sex which is Not One." *This Sex Which Is Not One*, translated by Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke, Cornell UP, , 1985, pp. 23–33.
- Irigaray, Luce, and Carolyn Burke. "When Our Lips Speak Together." *Signs, Women: Sex and Sexuality*, vol. 6, 1980, pp. 69–79.
- Irigaray, Luce. *Speculum of Other Woman*. Translated by Gillian C. Gill, Cornell UP, 1985.
- Kallur, Martin. "Queer Love in Social Media Marketing: A Case Study of Same-Sex Representations in Watch Brand Daniel Wellington's Social Media Channels ." *Linköping University*, 2018, pp. 1–50.
- Onanuga, Paul Ayodele. "Weaponisig Digital Architecture: Queer Nigerian Instagram Users and Digital Visual Activism." *LGBT Communities*, 2022.
- Palav, Krutika, et al. "Instagram Fake Account Detection." *International Research Journal of Modernization in Engineering Technology and Science*, vol. 3, no. 5, May 2021, pp. 455–460.
- Skowronski, Marika, et al. "Links Between Exposure to Sexualised Instagram Images and Body Image Concerns in Girls and Boys." *Journal of Media Psychology Theories Methods and Applications*, vol. 34, no. 1, May 2021, pp. 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-1105/a000296>.
- Sokolva, Karina, et al. "Beyond the Shallows of Physical Attractiveness: Perfection and Objectifying Gaze on Instagram." *International Journal of Information Management*, vol. 67, Dec. 2022.
- Stam, Robert, et al. *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics: Structuralism, Post-structuralism and Beyond*. Routledge, 2005.

- Tiggemann, Marika, and Isabella Barbato. “‘You Look Great!’: The Effect of Viewing Appearance-Related Instagram Comments on Women’s Body Image.” *Body Image*, vol. 27, Aug. 2018, pp. 61–66, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2018.08.009>.
- Whitford, Margaret. “Speaking as a Woman: Luce Irigaray and the Female Imaginary.” *Radical Philosophy*, vol. 43, no. 4, 1986.



“The Death of the Author” and Schism within Postmodern Feminism: A Revision

Debdas Roy^{*}

Abstract

The paper, while attempting a revisionist reading of the proposition and hypotheses of Roland Barthes' 1967 essay, “The Death of the Author” (in French *La mort de l'auteur*) from the perspective of postmodern feminism only, seeks to examine its intersection with some postmodern feminist perspectives which, again, are at loggerheads in some ways. The aim is to reassess its relevance to feminism in postmodern times when so many female 'authors' are making their marks and attaining worldwide recognition.

Keywords: feminism, postmodernism, poststructuralism, deconstruction, author, Barthes

The present paper seeks to make a revisionist reading of Roland Barthes' 1967 essay, “The Death of the Author” (in French *La mort de l'auteur*) from the perspective of postmodern feminism only. It aims at inquiring how far Barthes' idea of the death of the author is compatible with the feminist anxieties of authorship continuing in postmodern times and also explores how the (in)famous concept of Barthes has led to schism within postmodern feminism. The word ‘revision’ denotes the act of looking back—an act that refreshes the order of the existing critical opinions. It is not only embedded in the idea of retrospection with fresh eyes but also involves a reappraisal of the content. If the initial infatuation after the publication of a critical text—for that matter any text—is the sense of wonder inspired by ‘the cover design of a text’; if the inclusion of the text in the personal book collection is ‘the reading of the introduction’ to that text, then revision, usually done much later after the publication of a work, is ‘the negotiation with meanings of the content’ of that text. Revision purports to approach the same old text from either a

^{*} Associate Professor in the Department of English, Vidyasagar University, West Bengal, India.

radical perspective or from a slightly different perspective. The present paper seeks to make no comprehensive revision of the essay by Barthes but will examine its intersection with some postmodern feminist perspectives which, again, are at loggerheads in some ways. There is no reason to think that the emergence of dissenting views within postmodern feminism is a retrograde sign. Dissenting views are the sine qua non of any healthy group and are the very condition of a group's subsistence. After its publication in 1967, the essay by Barthes received bouquets from the majority of the French postmodern feminist thinkers among others. When the initial infatuation with the essay was over, some of the postmodern feminists began to feel uneasy about Barthes' idea of the death of the author. They thought that 1960s, 1970s and 1980s were the times when so many female writers articulated a desire to become 'authors' of their own lives. At precisely this time, Barthes was announcing the death of the author, women authors had just gained ground after centuries of anxiety and suppression. Having been relegated to the position of the 'second' in the patriarchal cultural set-up through centuries and having been reduced to the status of being the 'objects' instead of the 'subjects' in art and literature created by male authors through the ages, women writers had started to make their 'presence' felt as authors. At such a moment of resuscitation and aeration in the field of the feminist movement, the proclamation of Barthes came down as a kind of 'blow'. Women writers were forced to negate themselves as authors because they belonged to a postmodern era dominated by feelings of incredulity towards authorship. Throughout history, they argued, the male has been in the subject position and women have been 'silenced'. History has been dominated by the male as the subject. It is unfortunate that at a time when after centuries of subjugation and silencing, women had begun to demand the right to name themselves, the concept of subjecthood and authorship became so problematic. The present essay seeks to make a revisionist reading of the proposition and hypotheses of Barthes in his essay "The Death of the Author" with a view to reassess its relevance to feminism in postmodern times when so many female 'authors' are making their marks and attaining worldwide recognition.

Since its publication in 1967, the French literary critic and theorist Roland Barthes' 1967 essay, "The Death of the Author", published in the American journal *Aspen* (no. 5–6), has been enjoying great popularity. The essay has been hailed by postmodern and poststructuralist thinkers as Barthes' entry into poststructuralism and establishing his reputation as a major poststructuralist and postmodern thinker. The most interesting thing about the essay is its challenging of the conventional idea of who an author is. Barthes announces that writing is the "destruction of every point of origin" (164). In writing, the subject slips away. The identity of the author is lost. It is a 'negative space' in this sense. The ideas in a text are not the expression of an author's self and intention. The author works in a field without origin because language, the origin of the author, calls into question all origins. Alluding to Balzac's *Sarrasine*, Barthes asks a volley of questions regarding who is hidden beneath the woman (actually a castrato) with whom the protagonist falls in love in Balzac's text. He wonders if it is Balzac who is furnishing his personal experience of the philosophy of woman. "Is it Balzac the author professing 'literary' ideas of femininity?" asks Barthes (164). Barthes then says that we shall never know the answer and then he writes that writing is the space "where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing" (164–165). The death of the author has been understood in terms of the death of God that Nietzsche talked about.

Barthes also wrote that writing is a 'neutral, composite and oblique space' (164). Neutral because the preponderance of the subject is lost after the birth of the text and language knows no man or woman as 'person'. Language knows the 'I' as the 'subject', not as the 'person'. Meaning is created not by the author but by the play of signifiers. The 'author' is outside the meaning-making process. Writing is 'composite' because the text is a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend. Writing is 'oblique' because a fact is narrated intransitively—an act in which the author is like a symbol. Alluding to ethnographic narration, Barthes says that the author is a 'shaman' or mediator. His 'performance' (i.e., mastery of the narrative code) is more important than his genius and the 'performance' takes place 'here'

and 'now'. The enunciation has no other content than the act by which it is uttered. Looking at history, Barthes opines that the author as a 'human person' is a relatively modern figure emerging from the Middle Ages with English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation. The author is the creation of capitalist ideology. Positivism, the epitome of capitalist ideology, has attached the greatest importance to the person of the author, though some writers (e.g., Mallarmé, Paul Valéry, Marcel Proust, surrealist writers, and many linguists) have long since attempted to loosen the power of the author. Refusing to give any precedence to the author over the thing written, the author is born simultaneously with the text and does not precede the birth of the text. Writing begins only when the author enters into his or her death. According to Barthes, the author is a 'scriptor' whose gesture is one of 'inscription' rather than 'expression'. The text is a tissue of quotations from innumerable centres of culture. The text is nothing but a tissue of citations resulting from the thousand sources of culture. The author imitates and mixes writings already present. What he expresses is nothing but a ready-formed dictionary whose words are explainable through other words. The author is not the writer but a repository of language that cites from the lexicon to 'script' a text. Text is not an expression of the inner self of the author but a tissue of citations resulting from the thousand sources of culture. He simply recycles the signifiers. Thus, Barthes frees the text from interpretative tyranny and revolutionises the method of reading and criticism by diminishing the importance of the author and by lending more freedom to the readers. He envisages a split between authority and authorship. The text is a tissue of signs infinitely deferred. It further proves what a writer incorporates in a text is not his or her own but are 'quotations', i.e. things or ideas already existing in culture. An author puts the existing things together and hence he is a 'scriptor'. Finally, Barthes famously wrote that reading and criticism are not deciphering the meaning of a text. According to Barthes, the author is the ultimate arbiter of meaning, but the 'explanation' of a work is not to be sought in the 'man or the woman' called 'author'. Meaning inheres in reading. Meaning is more in the destination (reader) than in the origin. The birth of the reader takes place at the cost of the death of the author.

It is not surprising that such novel ideas as enunciated in Barthes' essay elicited spirited response from the poststructuralist and postmodern thinkers, including those belonging to the feminist fold. Michel Foucault, for example, in his essay "What is an Author" (1969) did not mention the name of Barthes, but he engaged with Barthes' ideas. Foucault problematised the "author function". He explained the author as a classifying principle within a particular discursive formation. Adopting historicising approach, Foucault is of the opinion that the idea of the author, which we are inclined to consider as a timeless, irreducible category, is rather a function of discourse which has affected history (Lodge 195). For example, before the Renaissance, the attribution of authorship was more important in science, whereas in the era of humanism and capitalism the reverse has happened. Jacques Derrida, in his essay "The Death of Roland Barthes" (1981), paid homage to Barthes. It is worthwhile to note how the postmodern feminist thinkers responded to Barthes' essay. French feminism was greatly interested in theory. Taking as its starting point poststructuralist theory, especially that of Derrida's concepts of linguistic uncertainty and Foucault's ideas of sexuality and authorship and also Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, the French feminists, despite far from being identical in their opinion, on the whole, believed that the literary text is not a reproduction of personal voice expressing the minute of personal experience. They believed that literary text is never primarily a representation of reality. They lay more stress on language, psychology, philosophy, and art of representation than on texts and authorship. They come to the texts at last and authorship is of the least importance to them. Carried away by the wish to reject the modernist assumption of the rational, autonomous 'subject' who tries to arrive at 'truth', the French feminists believed that the individual identity of the author is a 'fiction' and a creation of the patriarchal culture that 'otherises' women. For example, Luce Irigaray (French) in *The Sex which is not One* (1977) embraced 'pluralistic epistemology' (Hekman 98) which critiques the idea of the author as an 'individual' or 'person'. Julia Kristeva was an important member of the male-dominated Tel Quel group in Paris to which Roland Barthes, Lucien Goldmann, Philippe Sollers (later married Kristeva) and others belonged. Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault belonged to the group, among others. It is Tzvetan

Todorov who introduced her (Kristeva) to leading critical thinkers of that time, including Roland Barthes. Barthes had an abiding influence on her. Julia Kristeva, in her essay “Woman can Never be Defined” (1974), critiques the author-centric patriarchal discourse in which the male is the subject. Her life-long preoccupation with the question of the 'construction of meaning' may be ascribed to the influence of Barthes among others. Like Barthes, she consistently attacked preconceptions and she wanted the reader to reformulate perceptions. Apart from being concerned with the question of language, she was, like Barthes, concerned with the questions of self and subject which, she also thought, was ‘constructed’. Her belief that writing (*Ecriture*, i.e. a signifying practice in the context of cultural production) occupies a social space (reminiscent of the concept of ‘intertextuality’) instead of the space of the individual author aligns her with Barthes. She had little faith in any authorial denomination. She aimed to subvert the dominant power and structure of all discourse. Of course, the latter part of her career as a writer is marked by an increasing interest in the 'individual' and the ‘personal.’ Essentially, she sees subjectivity/identity as a *process* (not a *state of being*) and yet contained as a ‘thing’ within a humanist or essentialist framework (a social structure) because she wants to preserve a place for the *subject*, albeit a *subject-in-process*, because, without this, the ‘pulsions’/drives in language cannot be explained. Helen Cixous (Algerian-born French), in her “Stories”, “The Laugh of Medusa” (1975) and other writings, also questions the masculine subject which dominates patriarchal dualistic writings. Despite their individual differences, they are united by their advocacy for ‘écriture feminine’ and distrust of the author, who, according to them, is a patriarchal creation. Apart from these French feminists, another postmodern feminist who has impacted the postmodern debates around subjectivity, identity and authorship is Judith Butler. Immensely influenced by Derrida, Foucault and the French feminists, Butler, in her *Gender Trouble* (1990), says that the identity of a woman is a ‘fiction’—a pronouncement that aligns her with Barthes. She stands diametrically opposite to her predecessors in the fields of the feminist movement for replacing the male as the perennial ‘subject’ in literature and art when she says that there is no essential subject called ‘woman’. She dissociates the noun ‘woman’ from the very ‘is’ and associates it

with 'does'. Gender, to Butler, is a 'performance'—a word in which we catch echoes of Barthes's utterance (according to Barthes author's 'performance' is more important than his genius) in the essay under discussion. If Barthes' essay sounded the death knell for the prospective 'authors', Butler's statement hit at the very core of the feminist movement hitherto done – i.e. establishing a unique feminine identity in the face of patriarchal erasure and existential crisis. The moment she rejects the identarian term 'woman' as 'fiction', all preceding movements for establishing women's identity tend to be destabilised. Linda Nicholson, in her book *Feminism/Postmodernism* (1990), has opined that feminism and postmodernism are complementary and Linda is of Barthes' party either knowingly or unknowingly.

The dismissal of the 'function' of a female author within postmodern feminism has led to controversy and schism. Some feminist thinkers have questioned the wisdom behind throwing away the 'woman' category on the plea that this is necessary to erase the binaries, hierarchies, and structures related to modernism and Enlightenment. They question the postmodern strategies for challenging patriarchy because those strategies are, in turn, questioning the feminist 'subculture' itself. They argue that at the heart of the concept of the 'death' of the author as subject, there is nihilism which is the hallmark of poststructuralism and postmodernism. Hence, the concept of 'death' of the author—basically a 'negative' concept—is not in sync with feminism because the latter is a movement which is basically 'positive'. Feminism strives to 'denaturalise' the dominance of the male author and the hierarchised binaries and not to 'delete' the author. Feminism seeks to 'improve' the condition of women in society and art and give 'birth' to new values which, though in a state of flux, are nevertheless positive and constructive. Postmodern feminists like Linda Hutcheon, Joseph P. Natoli, Chris Weedon, Patricia Waugh, Nancy Hardstock, and some other thinkers tend to critique the alliance of postmodern feminism with the idea of the death of the author. Their arguments take the following trajectories.

Down the ages, patriarchy has been uneasy about female authorship. A brief look at cultural history proves that women have

felt restrictions in both life and art. Reading and writing by a woman has not been accepted as something normal and desirable. This is true in varying degrees about almost all cultures across widely apart geographical regions of the world and historical eras. The woman has suffered the anxiety of authorship in a patriarchal cultural set-up. Writing has been thought to be the prerogative of the male as if the woman is an outsider in this field. She does not 'fit in' here. The word 'author' carries underpinnings of patriarchal 'authority'. Thus, the 'anxiety of authorship' has not allowed a woman author to form an established canon and stable literary tradition. Scattered here and there and across widely separated periods, women authors have formed a subsidiary culture which, unlike the male authors, was relatively free from what Harold Bloom calls the 'anxiety of influence'. Female authors need not have any conflicting relationship with their literary predecessors. On the contrary, they wished to belong to a 'tradition' of female authorship without adopting the strategies of 'swerves' and 'misreading' of the precursors. Instead, a female author's "self-creation involves her in a revisionary process" (Gilbert and Gubar 49). Her battle is not against her predecessors but against 'her' misrepresentation by 'him'. She struggles for self-definition—a struggle in which her precursors are compatriots rather than competitors. Not that the desire to have a room and literature of their own is a desire expressed in the twentieth century only. This has been an eternal wish nurtured by women of all ages, but patriarchy has been uneasy about this wish for authorship and also about the demand for a distinct space for women in the cultural arena. Rather, according to Anne Finch, those who have made such demands have been looked upon as intruders on the rights of men (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 8). For example, the Renaissance and Reformation in Europe were hardly for women. It was 'presumptuous' for women to try the pen and the 'sin' can't be redeemed by any virtue. It was better if she was the 'lady of the house'. She was hardly seen in the space outside the precincts of home and none saw the whole of her but herself (Riding qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 9). The creative gift was thought to be a male 'gift'. The 'pen' has been thought to have a natural relationship with the 'penis'. Though queen Elizabeth I was on the throne of England for quite a long time, the system of representations in art and

literature was dominated by the male. The literature and culture of the English Renaissance as a whole carried symptoms of a patriarchal culture, and female authorship was hardly wished for. The female body, as well as female creativity, was to a great extent "problematic" and "unstable" during the Renaissance. Sexual difference was the "logic of every discourse" and woman was defined phallogcentrically as man's 'other'. The situation worsened during the Enlightenment. There was little change regarding the idea of female authorship till the end of the Victorian period. Poet-preacher Hopkins spoke for the late Victorian and early modern age when he wrote in a letter to his friend R. W. Dixon that an artist's power of masterly execution "marks off men from women" and "the male quality is the creative gift" (133).

Thus, after centuries of neglect, the female authors in the 1960s and 1970s seemed to have realised for the first time in the history of literature and criticism the significant role a woman author might assume. It was the time of the beginning of the real women's movement, out of which later feminism grew. Feminist thinkers seemed to have diagnosed the problem of women's inequality in society and, in some areas, proposed solutions. They realised the significance of the derogatory images of women promulgated by literature down the ages and felt that it was vital to combat those images and question male authority and coherence. Simon de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* was published in 1949 but exerted a strong influence in the 1960s, and this book played a crucial role in sparking the second wave of feminism. She questioned in significant ways the derogatory portrayal of women in the novels authored by male writers, especially D. H. Lawrence. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, was instrumental too in sparking second-wave feminism in the United States. Putting behind the feminist demand for voting rights, feminist literary movement had been concerning itself with the question of authorship and the question of holding the subject position in a literary work. It was a time of spirited response to the question of female authorship and identity. Feminists began to look askance at the heroines in 19th-century fiction who were concerned with seeking their marriage partner instead of working for an independent living. They critiqued Jane Austen's heroines who

believed that marriage determines their ultimate social position and fulfilment in life. Female authors like Iris Murdoch (1919 – 1999), Muriel Spark (1918 – 2006) and Doris Lessing (1919 –2013) were rediscovered and were read anew. The way they transgressed the rules and boundaries of society, the way they utilised their anger against the patriarchy and the way they vocalised female physical experiences as a source of female creative power were much praised in the 1960s. Feminist thinkers began to feel proud of their ‘authors’. Feminist criticism turned out to be combative and polemical, exposing the mechanism of patriarchy. They questioned the cultural mindset that perpetuated sexual inequality. The feminist thinkers not only reassessed the female authors of the past, but critical attention was paid to books by male writers also in which influential images of women were constructed. Anglo-American feminist literary criticism, in particular, began to retrieve the lost tradition of women authors.

Instead of focusing on theory, the Anglo-American branch of feminist criticism concentrated on theme, motif and characterisation in literary works by female and male authors. The fact that they placed considerable emphasis on the historical and non-literary materials like the author’s diary, memoirs, social history, medical history etc., bears proof of their trust in the ‘life’ of the ‘author’. Mary Ellmann, in her book *Thinking About Women*, questions male attitudes towards female creativity. She says that men misread women's writing because they cannot think of women as anything but women. She puts it nicely: “With a kind of inverted fidelity, the discussion of women's books by men will arrive punctually at the point of preoccupation, which is the fact of femininity. Books by women are treated as though they themselves were women, and criticism embarks, at its happiest, upon an intellectual measuring of busts and hips” (Ellmann n.p.). Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* (1970), Ellen Moers’ *Literary Women* (1976), and Elaine Showalter's (leader of the American group) *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) blazed a trail for the feminist literary movement. Though published in 1979 Elaine Showalter’s *Towards a Feminist Poetics* respectfully looked back at women authors who wrote in an effort to equal the intellectual achievements of the male writers. Showalter also reassessed

women's writings that protested against male standards and values and advocated women's rights and values, including a demand for autonomy. She also emphasised how women have left behind the stage of imitation and protest and how the female experience has emerged as the source of autonomous art. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in their work *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), focussed on the female anxiety of authorship in the nineteenth century. They felt that women writers share a set of similar experiences and that male oppression or patriarchy is everywhere essentially the same. Patricia Stubbs, in her work *Women and Fiction* (1979), not only focuses on Hardy, Moore, James, Gissing, Wells, Bennett, Forster and Virginia Woolf but also surveys the work of less famous writers, feminist and non-feminist—Olive Schreiner, George Egerton, Mrs Humphry Ward, Eliza Lynn Linton and others. To embrace Barthes' viewpoint regarding authorship in the backdrop of such a productive context was to miscarry a hard-conceived foetus.

This is to defeat the purpose of those female authors who, while suffering closure, prohibition and confinement, have tried to assert themselves as authors of both their lives and art. At different points in time, many women readers and writers, as well as a handful of male thinkers, have appreciated female authorship, but their endeavours have been piecemeal. For example, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in the *Preface* to the First Edition of their seminal book *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), have observed that in the nineteenth-century, women formed a literary 'subculture'. Female authors tried to relate to and support each other. They consciously tried to form a female tradition of writing, and Gilbert and Gubar have in their book, which alludes to Bertha Mason, the mad woman confined to the attic in *Jane Eyre*, have retrieved that tradition "in its entirety" (xi). After a long period of both literal and metaphorical confinement, women in the 1960s and 1970s began to feel the joy of being authors. Elaine Showalter, in her essay "Towards a Feminist Poetics" (1979), is not only concerned with "gynocriticism" but also with women as authors and producers of textual meaning. She is also concerned with "the history, themes, genres and structures of literature by women" (25). Olivia Heal, in her recent essay "Towards a Matricentric Feminist Poetics" (2019), which recalls Showalter's essay, has drawn our attention to a concept which is

reminiscent of a central concern of Cultural feminism, viz., the importance of mothers as the author (117). She is interested in evolving a critical methodology for reading maternal writing. Heal, in her essay mentioned above, makes a mention of such essays as “Matricentric Feminism: A Feminism for Mothers” by Andrea O'Reilly, “Practicing Matricentric Feminist Mothering” by Fiona Joy Green, “Towards Matricentric Feminism in the Caribbean: Inroads and Opportunities” by Talia Ensard. These essays are also more or less concerned with the question of mothers as authors. Susan Rubin Suleiman in her essay “Writing and Motherhood” has announced, “It's time to let mothers have their word” (120), though Adrienne Rich in her *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* and Jane Lazarre in *The Mother Knot*, clamoured the same call before Susan. The emergence of 'mom-literature' in the West further bears proof of this demand. Given this context of the 'birth' of so many female 'authors' and 'critics' in the 1960s and 1970s, some postmodern feminists find it difficult to accept the announcement of the 'death of the author' by Barthes.

The points raised by Barthes regarding the death of the author in hardly tenable in the context of the storming of the literary as well as social science canon by women's life narratives. Emerging in the 1980s, women's life narratives have become a major area of study. The study of history, anthropology and ethnography can hardly do without the 'origin'. Queer autobiographical narratives would seem to be empty vaunt without the 'life' of the author. Dalit women's autobiographies have found a niche in recent times, and one can hardly read those without taking recourse to the life of the author. A folktale which is 'autotelic' is reliant upon the identity of the 'teller' (author's equivalent, to some extent) and his or her 'life circumstances' for meaning. The articulations of authorial identity and subjectivity have assumed new significance not only in women's writings but in other areas of study as well. Contours of the 'subject' have been remapped in autobiographical discourses. The things which come out of the author's life are no longer irrelevant. It is found that in life narratives, the author's childhood memories, among other things, are distinct and discernible. Life narratives are concerned with the 'processus' of the construction of subject and subjectivities, and in case of women's autobiographies,

insights from the psychology and life attitudes of the woman subject are helpful in understanding the work. This is neither to say that women are beyond the impact of culture and history nor that the subject of a woman's life narrative is a singular universal category as a subject. But the fact is that the life of the subject and the author is of some importance even today. This is also true about the narratives of race and caste. To accept the fact that identities and subjectivities in women's life narratives are plural, fluid, ever-changing and culturally multiple is not to diminish the importance of the woman as subject and not to take it for granted that the author as a subject is never at the intersection and on some common grounds of resistance as a subject. There is separateness as well as some commonality in the saga of life narratives. Despite the fact that the concept of autonomous selfhood is problematic, the self is never erased. For example, while the collective life is important, so is oral narratives and testimonies; the selfhood of the 'life' that is intriguing to the readers, is never redundant, even in this postmodern and poststructuralist times of reconceptualisation of identity. Another example of commonality in women's life narratives is the fact that the self of the woman is understood in relation to the mother who is not a universal mother but the mother of the individual author in the narrative and whose 'separation' from her mother is one of the root causes of her psychic dislocation.

Thus, there is no denying the fact that Barthes' concept of the death of the author has bred unease in writers who prefer to refer to their own lives in their creative work. Feminist writers in postmodern times hear a kind of 'warning' not only in Barthes' concepts regarding authorship but in some other poststructuralist thinkers too who think along Barthes' lines. For example, Paul de Man who considers autobiography to be a 'defacement' of the self of the author. According to him, all reference to real life is 'suspect' by the play of language. In his essay, "Autobiography as De-Facement", de Man says that autobiography does not go without some embarrassment. Compared to other genres, autobiography, according to de Man, looks disreputable and self-indulgent "in a way that may be symptomatic of its incompatibility with the monumental dignity of its aesthetic values" (68). Both Derrida and de Man have put forward theories of autobiography in which

‘death’, as much as life, “motivates or determines autobiographical discourse” (Malhotra 35). Thus, many postmodern feminist thinkers’ (for example, Gayatri Spivak) alignment with the concept of the death of the author put forward by Derrida and de Man, after Barthes, has complicated notions of female subjectivity and agency in postmodern times and has bred schism within postmodern feminism.

Nobody knows if this schism within postmodern feminism arising out of the unease created by Barthes’ proclamation about the death of the author will be bridged or at all needs to be bridged, but the schism has definitely given birth to two new tendencies among others within postmodern feminism. First, a renewed emphasis on the author’s consciousness about the creative ‘self’ as well as the chosen genre(s). This has led to what Patricia Waugh in her book *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction* (1984) and Linda Hutcheon in her book *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (1984) revalue as metafictional self-consciousness. This emphasis on the creator’s consciousness within postmodern feminism has resulted in trust in some forms of grand narrative which seek to reach a ‘consensus’ to subvert ‘accepted’ practices of suppression and oppression. All postmodern feminists are not (for example, Linda Hutcheon) as distrustful of ‘history’ and ‘subjectivity’ as Fredric Jameson and Terry Eagleton, who dismiss ‘history’ and ‘subjectivity’ as allies of Capitalism. Linda Hutcheon uses the term ‘Historiographic metafiction’ to describe those literary texts that assert an interpretation of the past but are intensely self-reflexive. They are critical of their own version of the truth as being partial, biased and incomplete. Second, postmodern feminism’s tendency to look askance towards theory and to embrace life as lived in society. Today’s feminism is more life-oriented than theory-oriented. Theory tends to generate a fit-all straight jacket, whereas, in life, problems are unique and culture-specific. It is true that feminism as a movement will not remain monolithic and women as a group will not be homogenous, but feminist thinkers need to be vigilant regarding some such questions as that of authorship, especially when subordination of women, inequality between men and women, exploitation of women, violence against women is not over. It is good to reappropriate an idea instead of getting subsumed

by it, however dazzling it may look. The mirror is not impartial and objective. The mirror is problematic too. We may conclude with a question raised by Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenk in their book *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography* (1988)—“After Irigaray, the question remains—how have women articulated their own experience, shaped their own texts artistically, met their own reflections in the problematic mirror of autobiography?” (87)

Works Cited

- Barthes, Roland. “The Death of the Author.” *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, edited by David Lodge and Nigel Wood, Pearson, 1988, pp. 164-168.
- Brodzki, Bella and Celeste Schenk. *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*. Cornell UP, 1988.
- de Man, Paul. “Autobiography as De-Facement.” *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. Columbia UP, 1984, pp. 67-81.
- Ellmann, Mary. *Thinking About Women*. Pearson, 2010.
- Gilbert, Sandra and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-century Literary Imagination*. Worldview, 1979 (First published), 2007 (First Indian edition).
- Heal, O. “Towards a Matricentric Feminist Poetics”. *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement*, vol. 10, no. ½, 2019.
- Hekman, Susan. “Feminism.” *The Routledge Companion to Critical Theory*, edited by Malpas and Wake, Routledge, 2002, pp. 91-10.
- Hopkins, G. M. *The Correspondence of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Richard Weston Dixon*, edited by C. C. Abbot, Oxford UP, 1935.
- Lodge, David. “Introductory Note to Michel Foucault's ‘What is an author?’” *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, edited by David Lodge and Nigel Wood, Pearson, 1988, pp. 191-205.
- Malhotra, Meenakshi. General Introduction. *Representing Self, Critiquing Society: Selected Lifewritings by Women*, edited by Meenakshi Malhotra, Worldview Critical Editions, 2016, pp. 1-40.
- Showalter, Elaine. “Towards a Feminist Poetics.” *Women and Writing and Writing about Women*, edited by Mary Jacobus, Croom Helm Press, 1979, pp. 22- 41.
- Suleiman, Susan Rubin. “Writing and Motherhood.” *Mother Reader: Essential Writings on Motherhood*, edited by Moyra Davey, Seven Stories Press, 2001, pp. 113-37.



Semiotics of Gender: The Construction of a Lie

Ujjal Jeet*

Abstract

Simone de Beauvoir very influentially declared one is not born a woman but rather becomes one. Although the multifaceted scholarly research establishing the point is available, the commonsensical position remains that since the biology of a man and a woman is different, therefore they must be assigned different socio-cultural roles and consequently subjected to different treatments. Thus, the current paper seeks to answer the extant gap in understanding the issue. The paper reviews socialistic, feministic, anthropological, and psychoanalytic persuasions, which are currently dominant in analysing the concept of gender and presents a semiotic analysis under which the natural sexual differences get ossified as naturalised cultural differences which are very stubborn to change due to their essential semiotic nature.

Keywords: naturalised sexual differences; semiotic analysis; gender roles; gender myths; motherhood; women and control

1. Introduction

There has been a long-drawn contemplation on the genesis of gender disparities in human civilisation. Although numerous studies have been conducted re-asserting Simone de Beauvoir's famous statement about sex being a natural condition and gender a social construct, a commonsensical understanding of sexual differences rests on the argument that men and women are biologically different and women owing to their biology, are naturally restrained from fully participating in the work lives and, therefore, must depend upon men for their physical survival needs. Gender studies, on the other hand, emphasise that while there are biological differences, they have been constructed to be far more limited by social practices than what they ought to be:

* Assistant Professor at Department of English, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar

gender becomes a way of denoting 'cultural constructions'- the entirely social creation of ideas about appropriate roles for women and men. It is a way of referring to the exclusively social origins of the subjective identities of men and women. Gender is, in this definition, a social category imposed on a sexed body. (Scott 1056)

While all the critical persuasions agree upon the premise that gender disparities are the consequence of naturalised gender roles, they differ significantly in their explanations of the genesis and sustenance of gender roles. The political view held by the socialists considers gender oppression as a part of the larger production relations in a capitalist society. The capitalist economic system, which flourishes on the 'surplus value' realised from labour, benefits from women's housework as it is unpaid and therefore an essential form of 'surplus value'. Thus, in a capitalist society, it becomes important to relegate women to certain productive relationships which are characterised by oppression and immobility to sustain the nature of their work as 'surplus'. This is executed collectively by society through the consensus over the ideology of patriarchy and the cultural practices manifesting gender roles. But the problem with such a view was identified early on as the subordination of women pre-dates capitalism and continues under socialism and the view itself presupposes the ideology of patriarchy. In fact, a careful reading of Engels reveals that both capitalism and gender oppression owe their origin to prior social forms existing in human society based on material relations. He accords equal importance to the production of labour and the production of the family towards the social organisation of a country, "The social organisation under which the people of a particular historical epoch and a particular country live is determined by both kinds of production: by the stage of development of labour on the one hand and of the family on the other." (Engels 48).

Joan Kelly also argues that during the course of human civilisation, economic and gender systems interacted to produce social and historical experiences; that neither system was causal, but both operated "simultaneously to reproduce the socioeconomic and male-dominant structures of [a] particular social order" (Scott 1060; Kelly 216-227). Boserup et al traces the origin of patriarchy and

gender roles in agricultural technology, particularly the differences between the shifting and plough agriculture and the differences tend to persist even when the economy moved out of agriculture, affecting the participation of women in activities performed outside the home, including market employment, entrepreneurship, and politics (4-19). Hartmann also views patriarchy and capitalism as separate but interacting systems, although economic causality is given slight precedence by her (137-169). The sexual point of view, on the other hand, gives primacy to sexual relations over economic relations. Shulamith Firestone rephrases Engels's definition of Historical Materialism and argues that all production relations are the by-product of reproductive relations and that the first division of society into classes is based on the division of human sex:

the division of society into two distinct biological classes for procreative reproduction and the struggles of these classes with one another; in the changes in the modes of marriage, reproduction and childcare created by these struggles; in the connected development of other physically-differentiated classes [castes]; and in the first division of labour based on sex which developed into the [economic-cultural] class system. (12)

Scholars with anthropological leanings also support the reproductive aspect of material life. They understand reproductive relations by examination of kinship systems and focus on household and family as the basis for social organisation. But kinship relations, as assumed commonly, do not refer to blood ties but, instead, the social construction of blood ties. In this sense, the anthropologist deals not in the objectively observed facts of nature “but in those structures which the human mind characteristically superimposes on it” (Hawkes 24). Thus, the anthropological approach introduces the semiotic understanding of the sexual organisation of society. Lévi-Strauss (1985) pioneers the systematic exploration of the structure of cultural practices based on the semiotic model offered by Saussure. He analyses the exchange relations of various commodities among the kin under the theory of primitive reciprocity and adds that marriages are the most basic form of gift exchange in which women are the most valued gifts. Thus, he sees the exchange of women as a fundamental principle of kinship wherein kinship systems, by their

definition, comprise and reproduce the socially organised forms of sexuality.

In pre-state societies, kinship is often the idiom of social interaction, organising economic, political, and ceremonial, as well as sexual activity. One's duties, responsibilities, and privileges vis-à-vis others are defined in terms of mutual kinship or lack thereof. The exchange of goods and services, production and distribution, hostility and solidarity, ritual and ceremony all take place within the organisational structure of kinship. The ubiquity and adaptive effectiveness of kinship have led many anthropologists to consider its invention, along with the invention of language, to have been the developments that decisively marked the discontinuity between semi-human hominids and human beings. (Rubin 55; Levi-Strauss 62). Further, the psychoanalytic studies observe explicit connections between gender discourses and power and offer plausible formulations analysing the enculturation of the biological sexuality of individuals, primarily under Anglo-American object-relations and French poststructuralist approaches. While the proponents of the object-relations approach view the construction of the subject in relation to the actual experience of the child during the developmental years, the adherents of post-structuralism emphasise the centrality of language in communicating, interpreting, and representing gender. In light of the extant debate on the question of the genesis and perpetuation of gender, Joan Scott, in her study, raised some very pertinent questions which remain unanswered to date,

How can we account within this theory for persistent associations of masculinity with power, for the higher value placed on manhood than on womanhood, for the way children seem to learn these associations and evaluations even when they live outside nuclear households or in households where parenting is equally divided between husband and wife? (Scott 1063)

The current paper seeks to answer these withstanding questions surrounding the issue of gender and explore its semiotics by focussing on the role of human conception of sexual differences in the form of gender.

2. Discussion

When the society initially began, in the hunter-gatherer communities, resources were scarce, wars frequent, and the numbers determined the strength of a community. In this sense, reproducing, surviving, and guarding the community from external threats were the primary functions. So, life at the time centred on physical survival and the roles between men and women were divided based on these functions; while women were primarily responsible for reproducing and caring for the young, men would fetch food and guard the territories. Both thus dealt with life in its most elemental form. One sex produced life while the other sustained it with food and security of the colony. But women, owing to the power of giving birth, play essentially a more substantial role in the biology of mankind. Women's reproductive roles make them deal with the matter in its most basic form, i.e. human body and involve tangible material activities of nurturance both in their womb and through breastfeeding. Men, on the other hand, are naturally subordinate in their biological roles. Their role in the nurturance of the human species is at the most secondary to that of women, and they carry the innate desire to transcend their alienation from the means of reproduction of the species.

2.1 Matter *versus* Discourses

But in the history of human civilisation, with the evolution in the modes of production and the emergence of stable patterns of social living, the nature of occupations also changed. The power of a community was no longer based on the transaction of physical commodities but diversified from the need to deal with merely producing food or guarding the territory to symbolic wares like religion and education, along with all their derivative forms. Their origin lay in the semiotic process of signification, as understood in the Saussurean paradigm, and could be sustained by social discourses. Life became more settled, and fixed patterns of living emerged, which narrated the code of social living and came to be termed 'culture', a common and familiar term but extremely complex in its structure and nature. But cultural practices, which originally

began as a set of common habits acquired by a community to adapt to one's environment as motivated by necessity, over time turned into a matter of convention sustained by the process of social signification, thus acquiring an arbitrariness of character. The non-tangible forms of culture, like language, literature, science, values, belief system, rules, laws, morals, norms, customs, social institutions, etc. got distinguished from the tangible evidence of culture like food, clothes and shelter due to higher arbitrariness in the nature of the former. The significance of these semiotic systems lies in the ease and efficiency with which they can be transacted.

Thus, slowly as the world got more civilised, social discourses acquired more and more control over the material reality and processes due to the convenience attached to trading them. This is akin to the quintessential significance attached to token money in modern times, although it is just a symbol, not substance. But the cultural practices themselves need to be sustained through ideologies, where ideologies are defined as “the mental frameworks—the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the representation which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works.” (Hall 344). But interestingly, this change of occupations was more for the roles which were conducted by men while women, on the other hand, continued doing their material chores of cooking, cleaning, nursing, and reproducing. In the course of human history, men changed their social roles, but women did not, as women were constrained by their biological roles, which were essential to human survival and could not be replaced with symbolic gratification. There was no alternative for it, but men could proceed on to a sociological alternative for their primitive roles, and these sociological roles also offered them symbolic power as an answer to the biological power endowed in women. So, while women were naturally the bearers of biological matter, men took it upon themselves to be the bearers of the social discourses, and, in other words, while women were *the guardians of the physical life*, men emerged as *the guardians of the discursive life*.

2.2 The Construction of Two Myths

But since the social discourses are merely the representations of the material reality-sign systems used to organise and facilitate the material transactions of food, shelter, and sex primarily, the symbolic order suffered from a persistent fear of being overtaken once again by the physical order and therefore it cultivated a despise and angst against everything which was concerned with matter and body. This necessitated, first, to accord lower value to matter and higher to discourses in the process of social signification; secondly, to specifically emphasise and glorify men's contribution in the substantive process of reproduction; and, thirdly, to accomplish these ideologies. Thus, began the process of ascendance of male sexuality over female sexuality, and as a way of sexual propaganda, all forms of matter and material living and the people associated with it were appropriated of lower socio-cultural value by certain myths and certain discourses of purity. As a result, people dealing with nature in its raw form, either for the purpose of production or reproduction, became subjects of perpetual despise, ridicule and control. Or, in still simpler words, in a discursive world, both manual labour and reproductive labour were accorded lower social signification or value.

So, in order to control the sexuality of women, two myths were constructed to denigrate women's reproductive power and to depose women's essential biological nature with the cultivated cultural roles. These two myths are the myth of *the seductress* and the myth of *the mother*. The latter may be called the *good mother* henceforth in order to distinguish it from the biological state of motherhood. While the myth of *a good mother* was accrued with the 'value' of 'rightness,' 'goodness' and 'appropriateness,' that of *seductress* entailed despising. Thus, the cultural norms approbated a woman as honourable only if she fit into the myth of *a good mother*; otherwise, she could be subjected to any form of abuse or violence with or without minor regret. Also, a woman who did not fit into the *good-mother* myth, by default, fell into the *seductress* myth. Motherhood, therefore, remained the only way to beget respect and relevance by women in the new world of discourses. Further, the myth of *a good mother* could hold its symbolic value not only for the biological mother but for any woman who had the mythical discursive

characteristics of a mother, for example, certain age, certain body type, certain dress style and so on. So, women could claim the symbolic power of mothers as they aged. In fact, the younger women were particularly at a disadvantage here because they were less cultivated in the cultural associates of motherhood. Further, the younger women, although they were the 'practising mothers' (in terms of nurturing children), lay in the realm of body, matter, and material and systemically accrued lower social value. This resulted in the cultural practice of labelling younger women as *seductresses*. The narrative of Eve is one such myth practice. Another well-known mythical character Medusa consolidates this myth construction (Bowers 217-235). In the Indian scenario, the *apsaras* (heavenly nymphs meant to seduce mortal human beings) establish the relationship between youth, beauty, and the downfall of men, which they bestow. Despite the consistent efforts of the feminists to deconstruct the myths of the *seductress* and the *good mother*, they have been surviving with resilience. During as recent as the 2016 US Presidential election campaign, Republicans projected Hillary Clinton as Medusa and compared Donald Trump with Perseus, who would decapitate the Medusa once again (Johnston).

For men, these myths were useful instruments to appropriate and control women and decimate their naturally superior biology. Women, on the other hand, complied with these myths because this gave them a chance to secure the discursive power which was unavailable to them due to their unique biology. Moreover, since a *good mother* is an arbitrary cultural concept independent of the sexual nature or biological role of a mother, the older women, who turn into *symbolic mothers* as they are no longer the practising mothers in terms of a biological state, found it particularly favourable to their position. This is the reason that even though patriarchy is often associated with men owing to its linguistic reference to the father, it is not exclusive to them. In fact, any individual, irrespective of their biological sex, who propagates these two basic myths is a proponent of patriarchy. Women, further, by the process of cultural internalisation of patriarchy, go on sustaining it. The *symbolic mothers* come out to be the supporters of this arrangement as *guardians of culture*, along with men as those familiar patriarchal women who carry misogynous attitudes. Such females may be

assumed to be biologically females but socially males and vice versa for men too. The patriarchal women maintain the cultural practice of gender by serving as the guardians of the social norms as much as men and, in turn, exact respect in the socio-cultural regimen, which further serves as an incentive to reinforce their patriarchal orientation. In other words, a very formidable, self-sustaining, circular system of social behaviour and social conduct gets codified.

2.3 The 'Value' of Masculinity over Femininity

In order to promote the cause of ascendancy of male sexuality over that of females, men's obligations to the family, clan, tribe, state, nation, and community are given exaggerated prominence. This "principle of generational continuity (Brown 207-208) restores the primacy of paternity and obscures the real labour and the social reality of women's work in childbirth" (Scott 1058; O'Brien 191). And thus, male sexuality becomes much more desirable in the social setup. Sigmund Freud famously said that little girls, when they realise the sexual lack they have in the form of the absence of a penis, become envious of men who possess it. Here it must be argued that a man's penis is not a mere biological organ for performing bodily functions of reproduction and micturition. It has culturally constructed symbolic 'value' which entitle him to valuable privileges in the society like power, dignity and worth. While progressing from the prelinguistic to linguistic phase, little girls are increasingly aware of the power and privilege associated with male sexuality and yearn after all those entitlements which are associated with the discourses constructed around the penis. Thus, in addition to being a biological organ, the penis carries the socio-cultural construction of masculinity, therefore, is more appropriately termed the phallus. "It is an expression of the transmission of male dominance. It passes through women and settles upon certain men. The track which it leaves includes gender identity and the division of the sexes." (Rubin 66).

So, penis envy may, in fact, be called phallic envy. Thus, suffering from the *phallic envy*, women develop a sense of lack and inadequacy early on and try to compensate for the inadequacy by means of two reciprocal ways of compensation — the *masculine compensation* and the *feminine compensation*. A woman adopting

patriarchal values and working in partnership with men towards the subjugation of other women, particularly observed in older women, may be termed as *masculine compensation*. The alternative approach to this is *feminine compensation*, which is more common in younger women where they look at themselves through the gaze of men and constantly try to be more desirable for them. This entails the ideals associated with femininity. Both *masculine compensation* and *feminine compensation* ultimately legitimise the ideals of patriarchy and maintain the ascendancy of men over women. Critical of this latter kind of female position, Mary Daly compared such women with birds decked up to please the keeper, as “women who permit ‘Daddy’ to deck them out in splendour, to ‘cosmetise’ and perfume them, to girdle and corset them are like the birds who are painted by the keeper. They are whom Daddy dispatches to destroy the real, natural women” (Daly 336; Tong 61).

2.4 The Coordinates of Control

Thus, the very concept of the femininity of a female is given by patriarchy. With the conception of femininity comes the privilege of being ‘desirable’ and two concomitants of *honour* and *shame*. The concept of honour exists at counter poles with freedom. Honour is a special social value assigned to a woman’s social conduct with the most subtle but serious outcomes. The fundamental ground for this construct lies in the patriarchal imagination of women’s bodies. While women’s bodies are real, the appropriateness of the bodies is imaginary. But the imaginary is constructed to control the real. The clothes serve as the most effective hegemonic discourse to accomplish this. But the arbitrary nature of these discourses can be observed in the fact that different clothes hold different values in different cultures. For example, while in Western cultures, a knee-length skirt is culturally accepted and considered a very respectable formal attire for a woman of position and guarantees her to be taken seriously and professionally, in India and other South Asian countries, it may be considered a severe misconduct as was seen in case of Priyanka Chopra, the famous actor when she was widely trolled for her dress choice during her meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi (Bawa). The penalty for defying the norms of honour is a shame. Women are considered honourable in lieu of guarding the patriarchal social norms and cultural values which the women with

feministic consciousness often seek to give up; for example, during the slut walks, women consciously give up honour and embrace shame.

Further, since gender roles are generally considered to be mere extensions of the reproductive roles of women, the experience of motherhood, which is actually the capacity to give birth, is viewed as the need to give birth in order to get socially validated in the world and thus gets distinguished as an institution of motherhood. Motherhood, thus, viewed as an institution, becomes a cultural instrument for producing a gendered society. "Since motherhood stands at one end of this mutual engendering process, setting up the gender lens on representation of motherhood involves the not-enviable task of prizing it open from layers of patriarchal possession." (Bagchi 34). Further, it is not only women's bodies that are controlled by means of cultural discourses; their physical environment is also controlled. Women are constrained by denying them the right over their physical space. The physical body and the safety net around it, like room, home, cabin, carriage, coupe etc., are various words for physical space. Traditionally, none of them was owned by women. Further, women are constrained in their physical space as it is expected of good women not to go out because it is unsafe and dishonourable there. Good women stay at home and stay safe. But then, the primary myth of human culture is the quest myth. Narrative and folktales reveal that the journey is important for 'arriving.' Every hero must undertake a journey to seek himself (hardly any examples of 'herself') as there are many dishonourable men moving around there who may defile them or corrupt them. Like when Red Riding Hood went out to fulfil an errand, the wolf devoured her. The quintessential (feminist) question still remains was the child to be caged or the wolf. Similarly, a woman is not supposed to use her time according to her needs. Work is the means to access social respect and dignity, but multitasking often hinders a woman from focusing and excellence, and thus women fail to achieve a sense of accomplishment in their work. Either they are denied access to professional work (i.e., paid work) or their work is not assigned sufficient cultural value even when it is professional. Their primary duties remain family nurturance and reproduction, and their work is relegated to secondary importance. Thus, men's clubs and bars are an

age-old phenomenon. Women, in response, formed 'kitty parties' but then there is an enormous number of negative stereotypes associated with kitty-going women in media and films. Similar stereotypes do not exist for men's clubs. Thus, a man has spatio-temporal choices while a woman has none.

In fact, there are different professional ethics set for a man and a woman. It is common to see that women are supposed to choose either profession or family while there is no similar pressure on men. Whenever duty calls, a man must choose duty over love, but women have their love, their profession, and their social lives all centred on their husband (and his family case of South Asian cultures), the man in her life. This makes the life of a woman a gamble based on the man she gets married to such that if she is fortunate enough to get a man who is able to fulfil her emotional, professional, and social aspirations, then her life is sorted, otherwise, she is left with absolutely no scope. The man, on the other hand, if fails on the emotional front, can overcompensate in the professional field or can find peace and solace in his social life. A woman who fails her husband or fails in her sexual obligations is a 'fallen woman' and no good for anything whatsoever. Similar fallout is not present for a man who falters in marital or sexual responsibilities. He can still be a good son or accomplish his social or professional duties.

3. Conclusion

Therefore, in this sense, it is derived that human culture is a consequence of sex wherein the male-female binary retains the central place while other gender positions — the trans positions, since they did not participate in the process of reproduction — have been pushed towards the periphery. And conclusively, it must be said that the deconstruction of the lie called gender rests in the analysis of the structure of gender as an abstract, symbolic, representational, and associative construct which sets up certain normative heterosexual social and personal attributes and gender-specific social roles. In the context of employing new perspectives of seeing women and their gender identities and roles; and accommodating that in the existing social setup, Mary Beard writes, “You cannot easily fit women into a structure that is already coded as male; you have to change the structure” (87). This approach of reviewing gender leads to the

second aspect, which is non-practising gender. The propositions offered by Judith Butler, particularly the notion of *performativity*, which involves the possibility of un-doing gender as much as doing it, are particularly significant. Butler argues that gender roles do not lie in *being* like a woman; rather, they are accomplished by *doing* like a woman (198-200). Gender, in this sense, is viewed as a verb-something which you do in interaction rather than something like an attribute which you possess. "Gender, therefore, is a practice which is accomplished through repetition of the gendered acts and varies according to the context" (Mills 118). It is, thus, considered a malleable practice which, if done in one way, confirms certain cultural beliefs and, if done in a different way, has the potential to subvert them. Thus, while conservative texts act as ideological apparatuses to foster patriarchal attitudes and accomplish gender roles, a feminist text has the potential to use signs, symbols, metaphors, and motifs to expose gender politics. Thirdly, gender as a cultural construct has assumed its current form due to changes in the modes of production without any corresponding change in reproduction. But as of now, both modes of production and reproduction are constantly changing. If community living has changed humans from material beings into discursive beings, then technology can change (and is already changing) the very nature of discourses and cultural practices.

Technology is a human instrumentation used to better people's lives, and despite all the reservations felt, it is already manufacturing changes by making reproductive choices regarding sexuality and motherhood. The idea of surrogacy, which was as remote at a time as if it was from a science fiction novel, is the lived reality of many now. Firestone, along with other radical feminists, sees technology as the opener of new possibilities for women, liberating them of their reproductive limitations. Family control choices were the first revolutionary change in this direction. Even the mode of production no longer depends on heavy physical labour the way it did in the past, and women no longer need to be restrained by their bodies designed for reproduction. And, finally, women's labour, comprising both the reproductive duties and the household chores, being unpaid, lures the capitalist society with its 'surplus value'. If women's reproductive and familial work is acknowledged as work and compensated like other

forms of labour, it has the potential to change not only the productive but also the reproductive relations of society.

Works Cited

- Bagchi, Jasodhara. *Interrogating Motherhood*. SAGE Publications, 2017.
- Bawa, Jyoti Sharma. "Priyanka Chopra Trolled for Exposing Legs in front of Narendra Modi." *Indian Express*, 31 May 2017. <https://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/bollywood/priyanka-chopra-shamed-showing-legs-narendra-modi-priyanka-answers-see-photo-4682128/>
- Beard, Mary. *Women and Power: A Manifesto*. Hachette, 2017.
- Boserup, Ester, et al. *Women's Role in Economic Development*. Routledge, 2015.
- Bowers, Susan R. "Medusa and the Female Gaze." *NWSA Journal*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1990, pp. 217-235.
- Brown, Steven R. "Introduction: Generational Continuity and Change." *Policy Sciences*, vol. 37, 2005, pp. 207-208.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. Routledge, 2007.
- Daly, Mary. *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. Beacon Press, 1990.
- Engels, Friedrich. *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. Penguin, 2010.
- Firestone, Shulamith. *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*. Bantam, 1972.
- Hall, Stuart. *Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*. Routledge, 1996.
- Hartmann, Heidi. "Capitalism, Patriarchy and Job Segregation by Sex." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1976, pp. 137-169.
- Hawkes, Terence. *Structuralism and Semiotics (New Accents)*. Routledge, 2017.
- Johnston, Elizabeth. "The Original Nasty Woman." *The Atlantic*. 6 November 2016. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/11/the-original-nasty-woman-of-classical-myth/506591/>
- Kelly, Joan. "Doubled Vision of Feminist Theory." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1979, pp. 216-227.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. "The Principal of Reciprocity." *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Translated by James Harle Bell and John Richard von Sturmer, Alden Press, 1978.
- Mills, Sara. *Gender Matters: Feminist Linguistic Analysis*. Equinox, 2012.
- O'Brien, Mary. *The Politics of Reproduction*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981.
- Rubin, Gayle. "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex." *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader*. Duke UP, 2012, pp. 33-65.
- Scott, Joan Wallach. "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis." *The American Historical Review*, vol. 91, no. 5, 1986, pp. 1053-1075.
- Tong, Rosemarie. *Feminist Thought*. Taylor and Francis, 1998.



Book Review

Arundhathi Subramaniam. *Women Who Wear Only Themselves.* Speaking Tiger, India, 2021

N. Safrine*

Arundhathi Subramaniam—a poet, curator and author of twelve books including prose and poetry—has penned down the journeys of four women in her recent book *Women Who Wear Only Themselves: Conversations with Four Travelers on Sacred Journeys*. This book demystifies the unapologetic and extraordinary spiritual lives of these women by addressing questions pertaining to search of divinity, love and beauty. Beginning the book with the concept of thirst for the divine, the author deftly draws the reader towards the subtle arenas that constitute the essence of *bhakti*, and the esoteric relationship between the devotee and the deity. The author calls herself a ‘seasoned listener,’ and has aptly embarked on the task of recording the spiritual lifestyles of 1) Annapoorni amma, the naked saint, 2) Maa Karpoori, a young monk, 3) Balarishi, a nadhayogini, and 4) Lata Mani, an intellectual turned tantric practitioner.

For a seeker of seekers, Arundhathi, the thirst to comprehend the nuances of the spiritual path had never been sated by the male mystics. A possible lacuna existed and that would be assuaged by finding the voices of the female mystics. This served as one of the motivating factors for Arundhathi to craft life-stories of these four spiritual women. Arundhathi addresses them as a bunch of quiet women who radiate a blazing fire within themselves and are capable of kindling an energetic search drive within amateur seekers like the author herself. The notion of gender may sound inconsequential in *bhakti* tradition, yet for Subramaniam it becomes a point of central concern for understanding the different perspectives of ‘seeking/search’ within the realm of *bhakti*. The author defines the act of ‘seeking’ or ‘search’ as a valid form of desire. The recurrent

* Research Fellow in the University of Madras.

tropes of hunger, thirst, craving and desire demystifies the intricacies in the relationship between the divine and the devotee. The devotee is not just content with worshipping god but wants to eat god, make love with god, argue with god and hurl cuss words at god. Undoubtedly, this destabilizes the existing perceived notion of a hierarchical relationship, and demonstrates the *bhakta's* strong desire to embody the divinity and become one with the divine—the process during which the two identities (of the *Bhakta* and the divine) become one.

As quiet unsung women, these female mystics of contemporary times demonstrate a lifestyle that stands in stark contrast to the yesteryear female mystics, who were drawn into a kind of pasteurization wherein they were turned into calendar images, and transmuted into temple figurines. The author admits that she was fascinated by the unusual quietness reflected in the demeanours of these women. The four chapters of the book, each chronicling a different journey, throw light on the existing spiritual ethos of South India. By bringing the lives of these women to the forefront, the author explicates the different shades and contours that exist within the Indian spiritual ecosystem. Though these women adhere to different spiritual outlooks, their uniform approach to the divine through the process of self-discovery, serves as an underlying feature that places them as fellow travellers in the mystical voyage. Subramaniam strings together the four stories of these individualistic women and presents it as a collective journey for the readers. Interspersing the text with relevant ancient *bhakti* poems, Subramaniam delves deep into the mindscapes of the women mystics. Further, Subramaniam's conversation elucidates how spiritual is woven into routine of these extraordinary women who emanate a disconcerting presence in the way they relate to their respective deities. The steadfast beliefs and inveterate identities of these mystics provide them with the confidence to "wear only themselves." For instance, a conversation with Annapoorni Amma reveals her strong palpable presence. Her refusal to wear clothes displays utter vulnerability which acts a thread of commonality between all four women. Lata Mani, a renowned academician and a Marxist-feminist turned towards the spiritual path after a terrible car accident. A spiritual journey entails acknowledging the unexplored

spaces within oneself. And, this misfortune paved the way for Lata Mani's inevitable journey of discovering her the profound within her 'self.'

The crafting of the 'self' involves cutting, sewing and stripping away the inessential. The process of stripping away is not easy especially when the unneeded segments refuse to fall off very easily and this is the moment where pain comes into play—the pain of shedding the false garb and embracing the trueness of selfhood. The same is illustrated via the design of book cover. The metaphor of clothing plays a significant role in the characterisation of the self. Moreover, it is the recurrent motif of clothing which involves the constant process of cutting, sewing and stripping which are nevertheless significant factors in understanding the 'self.' As every woman in the book recalls her divine journey, Arundhati unveils the joy, pain and struggle prominent in the path of inhabiting one's own 'self'. The author recounts the ever-present solitude of the pandemic, and how it pushed her towards serious reflection, on the conversations and interviews she had had with these four women. These moments of contemplation gave birth to an urgency that motivated Subramaniam to document these stories.

Meditating on the division of flesh and spirit Subramaniam addresses the pertinent questions that surround the notion of *bhakti*. It is through the integration of flesh and spirit that these women craft a unique path to reach the divine, striking a perfect balance between the two. Through this she also reflects on the diverse spiritual tradition of the country. As the chapters unfold, one can trace the budding intensity of the conversation unearthing the 'aliveness' of the self as these women cast the radiant presence in a demure manner. Untouched by the fear of missing out on any momentary ethereal pleasures, these women stand out for their pursuit, which is expansive nature and its purpose. By bringing alive the stories of the four women spiritual mystics *Women Who Wear Only Themselves* re-defines the dated doctrines of *bhakti*. Undoubtedly, the book is a welcome addition to the oeuvre of existing *bhakti* literature, and certainly garners a wide readership from both the seekers and non-seekers alike.



Book Review

Neha Bansal. *Herstory*, Sahitya Akademi, 2022

Seema Jain *

Herstory by Neha Bansal is a collection of 39 poems published by the Sahitya Akademi under its Navodya scheme with a foreword by Prof. Sanjukta Dasgupta. In her preface to the book, Neha Bansal says her poems make a bid to address "half of humanity." Speaking of the status of women in society, she further adds, "... any spark of rebellion is stomped over so that she adheres to the ideal standards of womanhood." These are the stories of every woman who fights prejudice or is not able to fight ... of some women who become pawns of patriarchy while others become its victims. The binding themes of these 39 stories encapsulate careful scrutiny and critical commentary about the systematic oppression of women. Prof Sanjukta Dasgupta labels it as a "gender specific anthology that represents the voices of women in a chorus, as it were, expressing their resistance and resilience." She also says that the book "narrativizes lives and roles of women throughout human history." After a careful reading of the poems in this collection, the reviewer observed how many of Neha's poems dealt with the lives of women portrayed in Indian mythology, against the backdrop of our culturally conditioned patriarchal notions, and in common everyday life in the domestic set-up. These poems often traverse the expanse of generations and unravel the ironies, hypocrisies, contradictions and patriarchal stereotypes inbuilt in our value systems. Some of the immensely powerful 'stories' of women come from Indian mythology as Neha effectively wields her pen to re-write the tales of mythological characters like Ahalya, Shurpnakha, Mandodari, Hadimba, Draupadi, Renuka, Yashoda and Urmila. The age-old stories re-told from her sensitive perspective successfully underscore not only the plight, agony and suffering of women in a deeply patriarchal system, but also serve to highlight women's strength,

* Bilingual poet, short story writer, translator, editor and reviewer.

resistance and an assertion of their sense of righteousness even in the most challenging situations in poems like “The Fall of Draupadi” and “Mandodri’s Lament.” The following lines from the poem “Mandodri’s Lament” say it all:

What madness had seized you
to stake our dreams at the altar of your desires. ...
You didn’t hear the cries of new brides
Or saw those slender bangle-less arms....
One after the other, the heroes fell
As continued the macabre dance of death.

Likewise, some poems also dare to venture into questioning the existing notions about characters like Shurpnakha or throwing a spotlight on such neglected women characters as Hidimba and Renuka. In the poem “Shurpnakha’s Forlorn Song,” the poet deftly captures her sense of hurt, agony and humiliation in her lamenting words:

They treated me like a common whore
and continued with their contemptuous laughter ...
Couldn’t an evolved man like Rama
have counseled me out of my baser obsession? ...
I went down in history as a wanton Rakshasi
Not the Lankan princess of a noble birth
But a much mocked farcical stock character...

In the poem “Renuka,” the protagonist’s words sarcastically expose the hypocrisy of patriarchy that espouses a code of selfless effacement for woman and ruthlessly punishes her for any aberrations:

A good woman doesn’t ever desire
No! no! no! I have grossly erred.

And when her son Parshuram first beheads her and her four sons to punish her at her husband’s behest and then seeks their being brought

back to life, the following words sum up the poet's subtle commentary on patriarchy and the plight of women:

The four brothers and I
came back to life
and then I was forgiven by each great man
but a piece inside me died.

Although much literature is there focusing upon Urmila and Ahalya but the tender melancholy and pathos of Yashoda as a mother coping with separation from her Kanha has been touchingly portrayed in Neha's poem "Yashoda." One of the outstanding and distinguishing features of Neha's poetry is the diverse range of issues regarding women's life and existence that she brings into focus, especially in the context of our socially and culturally conditioned, slanted notions, be it regarding our parameters of beauty, the question of honour killings, acid attacks, prostitutes, barren women, dalit girls, arranged marriages in the traditional old fashioned way, witch hunt, unwed mothers, women in prison forgotten by their families, water wives, body shaming, female feticide etc.

Here are some strikingly powerful lines from some of these poems:

When they paraded her naked,
jeering at her, condemning her to be the *Dayan*
her ancient breasts on her naked body
were wounded by the stones pelted
"The Witch Hunt"

He praised *Durga* and on her sandal rosary beads
chanted her hundred and eight names
While she dreaded the coming days,
singing lullaby to her never-to-be-born '*Devi*'
"Devi"

She walked on a rose-petaled path
discouraging lovelorn offers..
happily ignorant of the bitterness
of unrequited love and the

smoldering murderous rage
being carried in a vial each day.
“The Acid Attack”

Some other poems like “Mother-in-law,” “Menstruation,” “Gendering: Defining Roles in Early Childhood,” “Postpartum Blues,” “The Test,” “A Flower Crushed,” “Requiem for the Earth,” “Bangles,” “Migrant Workers” also effectively draw attention to various aspects of women’s lives in diverse situations. A few poems like “Hiraeth: Mint Chutney Made by My Mother” and “Crotchet Lace Hankies” are suffused with a touch of personal memories and interlace tender emotions with some woman-centric issues. “An Outing with Friends” depicts a subtle contrast between the boredom and ennui in the lives of elite women despite having the best of everything and the image of an underprivileged woman solitary on the street:

She stood on the sidewalk
her clothes tattered and torn...
we soberly passed by her
and saw her survey the footpath
to rest her weary bones
under the cold street light.

To conclude, it can be said that Neha Bansal’s poetry on the surface appears to have the poise and grace of a lake but harbours underneath its calm exterior the profound depths of an ocean. And the beauty of her poetry lies not in any direct commentary or statements about the issue taken up but in letting her point emerge gradually from the subtle and artistic context skillfully created by her.



Book Review

Maninder Sidhu. *Nayantara Sahgal: A Century of Political Insights*. Routledge, 2023

Manjit Inder Singh*

Any assessment—critical or purely literary—of contemporary writers entails perusing a wide frame of their filiations and affiliations, their worldview, attitudes to history, society, national cultures, and more importantly, their response to how and why they write about what they consider urgent and inescapable. It is in this sense that Nayantara Sahgal's work and its intrinsic value ought to be seen, for there are few writers who have consistently wrought their oeuvre with compulsive issues which have shaped it, and the shifts in history, time and space with their contingencies that have equally transmuted it. Before going further, I recall what Milan Kundera said about man and existence in *The Art of the Novel*:

Heidegger characterizes existence by an extremely well-known formulation: 'in-der-welt-sein', being in the world....Man and the world are bound together like the snail to its shell: the world is past of man, it is his dimension, and as the world changes, existence (in-der-welt-sein) changes as well.

And a little later, Kundera expresses himself profoundly on history and historical circumstances: "Not only must historical circumstance create a new existential situation for a character in a novel, but History itself must be understood and analysed as an existential situation." It is perhaps appropriate to state that Sahgal's tryst with history and change—more specifically the pre- and post-independence Indian political history and the shifts from colonialism to democracy—are the core of her fictional and non-fictional corpus with all the complexities and positive/negative cross-currents that

* Former Head of the Department of English at Punjabi University, Patiala

continue to underline those shifts. Yet Sahgal's own involvement with modern Indian political and cultural ethos, as is too well known, have been intellectually intertwined, given her own 'filiation and affiliation' that have compulsorily driven her towards creatively chasing the course of historical watersheds and their existential fallouts.

It is imperative in any study (including the present one), to attempt an in-depth analysis and articulation of the synthesis between aesthetics and politics, and the way Sahgal constructs her novels to fathom the quintessence of the latter for a writer/artist. With her archival memory, ancestral legacy and graphic ability to recall the long march of India towards freedom, through her intimate bond with Gandhi and Nehru among other players of the Movement, Sahgal's credentials as a writer expressly connect her to politics and political reflection. Through writing, she identifies the role of those who shaped the pre-and post-independence political realities, positive and unpalatable for the human world she realistically frames in her work.

In a memorial lecture, delivered at the Punjabi University almost a decade back, Sahgal delved into the 'Politics of Fiction' and shared her personal views. For Sahgal, writing essentially comes out of one's history, geography, and the emotions and sensations these arouse. What she calls a 'political consciousness' includes the outer framework of our lives, not only how we are governed, but the beliefs and ideas, thoughts and realities that rule our psyche, and more importantly, the kinds of people we become as a result of owning and disowning them. Political awareness, thus, for Sahgal is the way we involve ourselves in the world around and within us. Aforementioned 'political consciousness' finds reification in her fictional characters, the social and cultural scenarios in which they exist, and the characters' attempt to adapt. Maninder Sidhu's multifaceted exegesis of 'political insights,' aptly highlights Sahgal's credo which includes the general outer environment in 'politics'—the social, economic, cultural and emotional influences we experience. Further, it also covers the actual political set-up we live in, and its fallout on existence. There are many occasions when Sahgal has strongly defended her own works and of others for overturning ruling ideologies—structures of dominance and civil injustices perpetrated

in the name of majoritarianism and right-wing political practices. Here, it is sufficient to say that Sahgal with a literary career spreading around seventy years has earned both praise and criticism, and has never been far from controversy.

Sidhu's monumental critique encapsulates nearly all political issues and imperatives, while critically assimilating complex nuances of literature, historical shifts, cultural mutations and theoretical ensembles to place Sahgal's works of fiction and non-fiction for evaluating her engagements with events and dilemmas that have shaped contemporary South-Asian realities. The impressive study covers a wide range of Sahgal's compulsive subjects for interrogation and critical overview. Among these, the most outstanding ones that have crystallized in her quest for understanding are: the colonial/post-colonial/neo-colonial/ trans-colonial discourses that have acted as 'complex determining forces of history'; her turning to a range of discourses from different cultures, histories and traditions; the assertion of imbibed legacy of 'rooted universalism'; her deep veneration for Gandhian thought, Nehruvian socialist vision of free India; her disgust with Indira Gandhi's authoritarianism and style of governance; her vehement opposition to Emergency and its inhuman practices, illustrated in *Rich Like Us*; her depiction of soulless, mindless and philistine middle classes in post-independence Indian set-up; and finally, her deep unease with Hindutava nationalist discourse. The present study judiciously marks the *raison-d'être* of her early and latter works. The early ones—*A Time to be Happy*, *The Day in Shadow*, *This Time of Morning*, - encapsulate the rise and ebb of euphoria of a nation transcending from colonialism to freedom, as they delve into the troubled and variedly imprisoned female psyche and identity. Her focus shifts to a penetrating insight into regional politics (bifurcation of Punjab), mutating shades of marital relations and bureaucratic power tilts in *Storm in Chandigarh*. *Situation in New Delhi* is a thinly guised praise for Nehru's statesmanship and personality, and the political vacuum staring at the nation after him. *Rich Like Us*, a tirade against the imposition of Emergency, also exposes the stark contrast between the ideologies of Nehru and Indira Gandhi. It foregrounds a major concern of Sahgal: the attempt to colonize the nation through industrial and marketing projects by global/Western bigwigs, corruption in public life and the slow

disappearance of socialism in favour of rampant capitalism and materialism. Interestingly, Sahgal focused her attention on colonial history in her latter works that followed: *Plans for Departure*, *Mistaken Identity* and *Lesser Breeds*. The informing themes coalesce 50 years of the independence struggle. These works masterfully highlight the civil injustices, political unrest in India; the lopsided, ambivalent response of the educated class towards non-violence; the cultural/racial syncretism that illustrated the redeeming power of humanism and much more. Rightly so, Sahgal's most influential phase of writing enabled her to handle a host of sensitive issues with detachment and ironic objectivity. Sidhu's study places her non-fictional texts *Prison and Chocolate Cake*, *From Fear Set free*, *The Freedom Movement in India*, *Indira Gandhi: Her Road to Power*, *Jawaharlal Nehru: Civilizing the Savage World* as valuable informative narratives about India's crucial phases in modern history and politics.

Before I conclude, it must be acknowledged that Sidhu's book that places Sahgal at the crucial juncture in modern history of Indian English Writing simultaneously connects the writer's intellectual and ideological concerns with theoretical conceptualizations, which have paved the way power is perceived and resisted. Moreover, author correlates Sahgal's work with Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Habermas, the New Historicist approach and the feminist core, reflecting the multi-layered arguments in her theory. Fanon, for one, had warned in *The Wretched of the Earth* against the moral bankruptcy of the emergent post-colonial middle class, which he feared would only appropriate the former colonizer's methods to negate the struggles of the masses in achieving freedom in Third World societies. As Sahgal has portrayed in *Rich Like Us*, the mimicry, greed and selfish interests of the middle class along with the affluent class conspired against socialism and equality. On the other hand, the New Historicist method, where literary texts are placed within the frame of historical texts to project them as 'historicist' rather than ahistorical, balances the textuality of history against the cultural specificity of literary texts. Sahgal's texts too enable a parallel reading of Indian History and its perforation through aesthetic representations.

The concept of 'Orientalism', wherein Said critically examines the inter-disciplinary epistemologies of power, race, culture, imperialism, history, and subversively and minutely studies the East-West relationship, is a political strategy for colonial expansion, for establishing the European cultural perspective as a norm. Likewise, the 'contrapuntal method' evolved by Said to analyse colonial cultural practices in *Culture and Imperialism* is a tool to excavate rich pre-colonial history and traditions. Said's advocacy of 'reactionary' reading is aimed at filling the 'gaps' and 'silences' deliberately imposed on native identities in Western literary texts. What connects it with Sahgal's works such as *Mistaken Identity* and *Lesser Breeds* is Said's call for the intellectual to remain connected with political realities for representing the suppressed to uncover silenced histories of the marginalized through political fiction, something Sahgal has been striving in her opposition to neo-fascism, cultural uniformity and religious harmony in the contemporary Indian context. The section "Intellectual Intertexts", comes out as the high point of Maninder Sidhu's critical capacity to handle a host of highly complex theoretical positions about philosophy, language, culture, history, psychology and multiple discourses with ease, erudition and aplomb, which in turn expand, amplify and intellectually justify Nayantara Sahgal's vision and world view as a writer, her literary and political activism, her constant crusade and struggle with the forces of oppression and power that make her(with this brilliant study) a writer to be engaged with by academics, scholars and researchers in the present and future.



Book Review

Sudeep Sen. *RED*. Nirox Foundation, 2023

Kamaldeep Kaur*

Red is palash, red is alta — / it is nuptial, it is birth. // Red is Kali, red is Durga — / it is Sappho, it is Andal.

Sudeep Sen's latest book of poetry and photography, *Red*, can be taken as a sequel to his prize-winning volume, *Anthropocene: Climate Change, Contagion, Consolation* (London: Pippa Rann, 2021). *Red* is the spectacular outcome of Sen's international fellowship at the Nirox Foundation in Gauteng, South Africa — a site heralded as the "Cradle of Civilisation", declared as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. The 100-acre estate with its rich nature reserves home to a vast variety of plant and animal life, stunning landscapes, fossil caves and a sculpture park, precipitated a remarkable upsurge of creativity resulting in this collection.

Imbued with Sen's characteristic zeal for the creative arts, the poetry is a tribute to the phenomenal power of nature and explores its grandeur over an infinite paleo-geological spatio-temporal scale. The book also comprises spectacular photographs of the terrain — a vivid and powerful visual treat that enhances and deepens the reading experience. At the heart of the text however is the colour 'Red', explored in all its manifestations across the physical and emotional panorama. It is the Yeatsian centre which does hold the diverse elements contained in the book. From the time that he arrives, the poet is mysteriously struck by and drawn to the colour red in "just about anything that donned the barest hint of that rufescent colour", he writes. The colour permeates through every pore of the collection. The poetry then gives reasons to this enigmatic allure for the colour red.

* Assistant Professor, PGGCG, Sector 11, Chandigarh.

The book is divided into two parts. Book I is titled “Red (2023)” — poems composed and photographs taken during his fellowship; and Book II is “South African Woodcut” (1995) poetry from an earlier collection from when Sen visited South Africa three decades ago. In a sense, this a journey from the present to the past, much like his own immersion in the past in this “Cradle of Civilization”.

Book I is further divided into 5 parts, beginning with “Children of the Stars”, a meditation on the cosmic cycles, creationism, the sun, the sky, the fossils. The spectacular “tectonic drama” (“Split Fossil”) is prised open, as the poet records “this old continent’s Black History” (“Dolomite”). Each element is/has been integral to the development of civilisation in the estate enriched with fossils and minerals. The stars, the sky, the waterfalls all point to a “slow charting of celestial memory.” (“My Intimate Skies”).

MY INTIMATE SKIES

for Sven Christian

The heaventree of stars hung with humid nightblue fruit.

— JAMES JOYCE, *Ulysses*

Pin-hole sharp rays, exact as chiselled diamond tips,
glow in infinite lumens. In this sprawling crisp-dry

Savannah highveld — these luminous eyes, light up
my vast intimate skies, writing out terrestrial

histories on an ever-shifting skyscape. Within
its private metaphors, this fossil-cradled terrain-
DNA

refracts. The cosmic clockwork measures exactly,
each light-ray’s frequency, wave-length and laser-

strength. It is astronomy’s language, a slow charting
of celestial memory on granite-black backdrop —

a plotted canvas, a maritime mapping of ocean's
unpredictable trade lanes. Memory is starlight.

The second part (in Book I) is titled “Red I” is the core of the entire book, phrases from which resonate throughout the collection whilst the poet expounds the meaning of red at multiple planes. It reads like an incantatory sacrament, an oratorical *tour de force*—invoking the colour as a primeval presence and symbol. Here are the first two sections of the 8-part long poem:

RED 1

1

Red is *palash*, red is *alta* —
it is nuptial, it is birth.

Red is Kali, red is Durga —
it is Sappho, it is Andal.

Red is my vocation,
my *Chandipaath*, your *Onam*.

On your forehead — I apply
triad-streaks of white-ash,

red vermilion mingled
in coconut-oil, glistening.

Love passion death decay, you say.
Red is forever & every day.

2.

Blood is not red, it is vital —
it is sanguine, it is sad.

Red colours my blankness,

my void, my needs.

It is hyoid's reflected hue —
of hymen, fertility, flame.

It is frigidity, it is coldness —
it is passion, it is deep heat.

Red is cerise, carmine —
it is raw, it is incarnadine.

Each shade, a subtext —
each layer, a mood.

Each line, an absence —
each texture, a canvas.

On the one hand it is “Kali” and “Durga”, and on the other hand the poet poses a rhetorical question—“is it an ordinary tomato in shopping aisle's ordinary?” Even though the poem traverses through the multiple zones of geography, physiology, anthropology, ritual and religion — the poet does not lose sight of the political. The troubled past and present of Africa, a continent of contradictions, where rich resources co-exist with abject poverty, is never far from his mind. The layers of soil that conceal fossils is apprehended thus:

Is this rock, a mere fossil
whose story has been

deliberately erased from
this land's troubled

history?

The poet is conscious of the illusion that this pristine, panoramic landscape entails and holds.

The third part titled “Red II” begins with a prose piece “Red Fence”. Departing from Robert Frost’s assertion that “good fences make good neighbours”, this fence is a stand-alone feature in the middle of a field that apparently serves no purpose. Sen however construes it as a free-flowing space, “its non-belief in barriers, boundaries, borders; its disinterest in keeping aspects of humanity gated.” In the poem “Holi” too Sen is reminded of the colourful festival with “no hierarchies, no classifications, no colour-coded demographics.”

The poetry in the fourth part, “Cranial Red, Bone Red”, captures the actual fossils found at the site. The poet attempts to decipher the hidden, ancient stories that are etched on each stone. The fossils are like a “song for our ancestors, from before the beginning.” Sen expresses the music and rhythm of nature as a bare tree with outstretched branches reminds him of a ballet dancer “in an inverted plié.” The poetry emerges from the intersections of anthropology, archaeology and art.

BALLERINA: TREE

Everything in the universe has rhythm. everything dances.

— MAYA ANGELOU

Arms out-stretched, torso arched, head cloud-hidden —

she flies through the air, unhindered by rooted stasis.

Her striated leotard — imprinted unevenly with time’s mercurial history, etched by morse-code electrical pulses.

Photosynthesis, capillary movement, now ended —
nature’s cycles fossilised as tree’s age-rings.

Unclothed, lightning struck — wan, bare, stripped —
robbed of her youth’s allure. Still she stands, statuesque —

a symbol of unbridled jouissance, in an
inverted pli  .

The fifth and final part of Book II titled “Brown, Black, White” is an assortment of prose, poetry, pictures and haiku deliberating on the dreams and desire of the heart. There emerges a clarity of vision as is envisioned in the poem “Unhoused Memory” where even the “dead’s hollow sockets have perfect vision.” The body, unhoused in being, stripped to the bones has perfect equipoise and proportion as it balances precariously on a string. In this section Sen also delves into the world of music and sound in poems like “Synthetic Heart” and “Concerto”—guitar strings, violin, chanting, humming, fingers flying delicately on piano keys—all these sounds reverberate through this section.

CONCERTO

for Jill Richards

Each soundwave, like breath-pause reverberation
is minutely calibrated — each movement, pitch-
perfect.

Over time, these flurries morph into a slow-motion
canter, fingernails galloping in air — landing softly

on keys of glazed ivory-white and obsidian-black.
Music uncharted on sheets — yet instantaneous

as spontaneous birth-cry. You lie on the piano, your
hands dangling, limp as if in post-delivery
exhaustion.

Memories past-present, adequacies-inadequacies
—vase-bottled — a bouquet of unexpected
flowering.

Violet and red, hemp and chillies — these aromas
fill
our lungs with sea-sonic magic, song and poetry.

Stein wines find their way into fossil-earthenware.
Unpeeling scales reveal inner chords —

silence, slowly unmuting orchestral strains —
echoes heard only by initiated ears. As you reach in,

and pluck the piano-hammers — a crescendo.
White piano's white noise in a bright white room —

our soiree's aria, word-stained and red-etched.

Book II constitutes poems from Sen's earlier collection, *South African Woodcut*, published almost three decades earlier in 1995. He transports the reader to the Africa that existed 30 years ago when apartheid was officially outlawed in Africa. Sen includes these "to lend and complete a socio-historical literary arc."

In *Red*, Sen captures his intense engagement with nature, with the fossilised past that points to a single place of origin of mankind on earth. It is hymn to our present times—the age of anthropocene and climate change, when humans have caused irreversible changes in the earth's ecosystems. At the same time, it carries us back to our ancestors (human and non-human) giving a compelling account of our anthropological history and the hazards of extraction economies in the age of global capitalism.



Poems
Kindness
Ranjiet *

1.
Kindness punctuates
your grief,
a consolatory warmth
of existing as
one among others.

Grief makes you alone.
Grief knows only its depth,
a meditation that
repeats more tears than breaths.
An epiphany,
you wipe out
with a soft handkerchief.

You sit still
on the corner of your bed,
and just see yourself-
the dark circles
under your swollen eyes ,
patches of overgrown hair
on your body,
that extra fat
melting on your curves,
thickness is your only lust.

You are kind knowingly,

* Assistant Professor, Government Post Graduate College, Sector-46,
Chandigarh.

there must be other people
just like us.
Each time you swallow
a lump in your throat
you think,
you must be
more kind to others.

2.
What do you do with your kindness
when you are angry?

You rehearse your anger.
your soliloquy reverberates
in the depth of your pillow,
the more you dig up your history
the more your memories tease you.

You wish
you could put him in your pocket
run into the wild
and wouldn't return until
he pleads guilty.

When you are angry
objects become braille- alphabets,
by breaking them
you explain yourself.

You fling a salt pig on him
and shatter the window glass,
you were kind enough
to spare his head.

3.

A raindrop falls
on a hot sand dune .

Before it evaporates,
the sand dune holds it
in its sandy embrace,
metamorphosizes it into a floral shape,
just to remind us
death is a beautiful thing.
A gust of wind kisses
and dissipates it.
Nature is kind, even when
its teeth are red.

Notes on Contributors

1. **Arundhathi Subramaniam** is a major Indian poet and author. She has written 5 collections of poems. Her volume *When God is a Traveller* won the Sahitya Akademi Award for the year 2020. Her major non-fictional works are *Women Who Wear Only Themselves* and *Sadhguru: More Than A Life*. She has also edited number of books of essays and poetry. The notable among them are: *Confronting Love (An Anthology of Contemporary Indian Love Poems)* (co-edited with Jerry Pinto) and *Eating God: A Book of Bhakti Poetry*.
2. **Amlanjyoti Goswami** is a young Indian English poet. He has published two critically well-acclaimed collections of poetry- *River Wedding* and *Vital Signs*.
3. **Kiriti Sengupta** is a bilingual poet and translator in both English and Bengali. He is the recipient of the 2018 Tagore Literary Prize. He has written 13 books of poetry and prose, 2 books of translation, and edited 8 anthologies.
4. **Gurdeep Singh** is Associate Professor at Sikh National College, Qadian. He has done his Ph.D on the plays of Girish Karnad.
5. **Kinshuk Gupta** is a doctor, bilingual writer, poet, and translator based in New Delhi. He has been awarded the Dr. Anamika Poetry Prize (2021), Ravi Prabhakar Smriti Laghukatha Samman (2022), and Akhil Bhartiya Yuva Kathakar Alankaran (2022). He has been longlisted for the People Need Change Poetry Contest (2020), The Poetry Society, UK; Toto Awards for Creative Writing (2021) and shortlisted for the All India Poetry Competition (2018); Srinivas Rayparol Poetry Prize (2021); The Bridport Prize (2022). Gupta edits poetry for Mithila Review and Jaggery Lit and works as an Associate Editor for Usawa Literary Review. His debut book of short fiction, *Yeh Dil Hai Ki Chordarwaja*, the first modern Hindi LGBT short story collection, is published by Vani Prakashan. He has been working with Tishani Doshi on his debut poetry collection. **Manika Arora** is Currently teaching Literature at Mehr Chand Mahajan, DAV College for Women, Chandigarh.

6. **Naresh Kumar** teaches history in Kamala Nehru College (University of Delhi). He works on the history of Hindustani and popular music. His recent publications include: 'IN Search of the National Music: Hindustani Music on All-India Radio'. PURJSS 29:1 (2021): 39-75 and Radha Kapuria & Naresh Kumar. 'Singing the River in Punjab: Poetry, Performance and Folklore', South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies 45:6 (2022): 1072-1094, DOI: 10.1080/00856401.2022.2124680.
7. **Richik Banerjee** teaches in the Department of English at St. Paul's Cathedral Mission College, University of Calcutta. He is pursuing PhD in the field of subaltern studies from Amity University Kolkata. He is a bilingual published poet. His last book on creative inutility and the radical freeness of the poetics ('L-Dopa') was published by Gangchil Prokashona in July, 2023. He is one of the members of the Indian Network for Memory Studies (INMS), which is the first national network for scholars in Memory Studies in Asia under the aegis of the Memory Studies Association.
Madhurima Mukhopadhyay is Assistant Professor, Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Amity University Kolkata. She was a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow and a Research Associate at the Institute of Development Studies Kolkata between 2016 and 2018. She has been awarded her PhD from the Faculty of Arts, Jadavpur University, Kolkata in 2016 and MPhil and MA from the Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University. She has recently co-authored the book *The Violent Domestic: Law, Its Practice and Strategies of Survival* published in 2022 from Zubaan, New Delhi.
8. **Ramyajit Sarkar** an independent researcher. Mainly his research interest is in society and culture of South West Bengal of ancient and medieval period.
9. **Richa Joshi Pandey** is an Assistant Professor at the Department of English, School of Languages, Doon University, Dehradun, India, where she has been working for the last eight years. She was awarded her PhD degree in 2016 by HN BGU, Srinagar Garhwal, Uttarakhand.

10. **Tom Phillips** is a UK-born poet, translator and lecturer who now lives in Sofia, Bulgaria. His own work has been widely published in journals, anthologies, pamphlets and the full-length collections *Unknown Translations* (Scalino, 2016), *Recreation Ground* (Two Rivers Press, 2012) and *Burning Omaha* (Firewater, 2003). He is the editor of the book of critical essays *Peter Robinson: A Portrait of his Work* (Shearsman, 2021) and two anthologies of SE European poetry (*Balkan Poetry Today* 2017 and 2018) and a contributing editor to the Bulgata website of contemporary Bulgarian literature in translation and the Northern Macedonian literary journal *Contemporary Dialogues*. His own work has been translated into multiple languages and he currently teaches both creative writing and translation at Sofia University St Kliment Ohridski.
11. **Sumneet Kaur**, has been working as an Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Guru Nanak Dev University for eighteen years and specializes in Postcolonial Literature, Diaspora Studies. She authored a Coffee Table Book, *Amritsar & Guru Nanak Dev University: The Contours of Inheritance* (2019). Dr. Sumneet Kaur translated a Punjabi novel into English as, *The Collateral Minds* (2020). She has also composed a book for children, *Grimms' Tales of Blessings and Curse – In Verse*, published in 2021.
Chitwan is an Assistant Professor in Department of English at G.N.D.U. She has published several research papers in national journals.
12. **Sarita G** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Government College for Women, Thiruvananthapuram. She was awarded a Ph.D. for her work on the politics of gender in Comics and is currently an approved PhD guide of the University of Kerala.
13. **Sreetanwi Chakraborty** is an Assistant Professor in Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Amity University Kolkata. She is a bilingual writer and has been invited by the Sahitya Akademi, Chandrabhaga Poetry Committee and many more.
14. **Dustin Lalkulhpuia** is a Ph.D. Research Fellow in the Department of English & Culture Studies at Mizoram

University, Tanhril, India. He has published one book on contemporary literary theory and has edited two anthology of Mizo poems.

Thongam Dhanajit Singh, Associate Professor in the Department of English & Culture Studies at Mizoram University, Tanhril, India. He is the author of Philip Larkin: The Poetry of Alienation (2014) and editor of Tribal Identity: Northeast India and Beyond (2020). His areas of interest are Indian Writing in English, Postcolonial studies and interdisciplinary studies.

15. **Maitrayee Sarma** has completed her undergraduate studies in English from University of Delhi, and postgraduate studies from Ambedkar University, Delhi. She is currently a doctoral candidate at Gauhati University. Her research interests include speculative fictions, postcolonial theory and popular culture.
16. **Saru Sachdeva** is a registered Ph.D. research scholar with the Department of Humanities at the State University of Haryana – Deenbandhu Chhotu Ram University of Science & Technology, Murthal (Sonapat). The topic of her Ph.D. research is “Gender Consciousness among Tribals from East and North-East India: A Critical Study of Select Narratives.”

Rekha is Professor of English in the Department of Humanities at Deenbandhu Chhotu Ram University of Science & Technology, Murthal, Haryana (India). Her areas of interest include Contemporary Indian Women’s Writing, and Culture and Communication Studies. She has regularly contributed research articles in national and international refereed journals.

17. **Pooja Duggal** is a PhD research scholar in the Department of English and Cultural Studies at Panjab University, Chandigarh. She has completed her Bachelor’s and Master’s in English from Kamala Nehru College, University of Delhi and Indraprastha College for Women, University of Delhi, respectively. Her research areas revolve around Animal studies and Dalit studies.
18. **Sehnaz Rofique Saikia** is a Senior Research Fellow in the Department of English, Gauhati University, India. Her

current research area is the role of energy (oil) and the posthuman through literary narratives. She did her MPhil on the representation of Somali masculinity in Nuruddin Farah's novels.

19. **Ishani Saha** is a junior research fellow in the department of English at Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University. She is presently working on LGBTQ studies. Apart from the area of gender and sexuality studies, she has a publication on folk Culture. Her creative writing has made its way in an Anthology of Poetry.
20. **Debdas Roy** is an Associate Professor in the Department of English, Vidyasagar University, W.B. India. He has done his PhD on the "Elements of Doubt and Uncertainty in the Select Poems and Sermons of John Donne."
21. **Ujjal Jeet** serves as an Assistant Professor at Department of English, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar in India. She has presented her research work at various national and international fora particularly in the field of Functional Stylistics and Doris Lessing Studies and has published in several journals of repute.
22. **N. Safrine** is a research fellow of University of Madras. She has published her research articles in reputed journals like Indian literature of Sahitya Academy. She has published several short-stories, articles and poems in Kitaab, Indian Periodical and IndiAanya. She also dabbles in calligraphy.
23. **Seema Jain** is a bilingual poet, short story writer, translator, editor and reviewer. Ex-Vice Principal, Dean Academics & Head, P G Dept of English at KMV Jalandhar, Punjab, India, she has twelve published books, (two published by the Sahitya Akademi).
24. **Manjit Inder Singh** is the former head of the Department of English at Punjabi University, Patiala, and former director of Centre for Diaspora Studies, Punjabi University Patiala.
25. **Kamaldeep Kaur** teaches literature to undergraduate and post graduate students at PGGCG, Sector 11, Chandigarh. Currently she is pursuing her Ph.D. at the Department of English and Cultural Studies.
26. **Ranjiet Singh** is currently teaching Literature at Government Post Graduate College, Sector-46, Chandigarh.

CALL FOR PAPERS

dialog, a fully peer-reviewed, bi-annual international journal of the Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh, is now open to submissions for its next issue (No. 42). *dialog* provides a forum for interdisciplinary research on diverse aspects of culture, society and literature.

The journal would bring out a **general issue on English and Cultural Studies**. We would accept scholarly papers on any of the following aspects or related issues:

- Postcolonial Literature
- Films and Literature
- Translation
- Literary Theory
- Indian Writings in English
- Bhasha Literature
- Popular Culture
- Life-writing
- Literature and Climate Change
- Diaspora Literature
- Gender and Sex
- Posthumanism
- Affect Studies
- New Media

Important points to remember:

1. Word limit for scholarly article is 4000 to 6000 words i.e. a minimum of 12 and maximum of 20 pages.
2. The papers must be in 12-point Times New Roman (in accordance with MLA style sheet 8th edition). Kindly refer to the [EASYBIB MLA 8 GUIDE](#) (Courtesy: www.steu.edu › documents › EasyBib_MLA8_Guide) and a [MLA Sample Paper](#) for the same. (Courtesy: owl.purdue.edu › owl › mla_formatting_and_style_guide).
3. The paper writers are to submit their papers to editordialog@pu.ac.in before the deadline, i.e., **15 January, 2024**, along with a 50-word biographical note, and an abstract of the paper.
4. The papers must be original and hitherto unpublished. No simultaneous submissions are allowed.
5. The paper writers are required to give an undertaking that their paper(s) is/are original.

Other guidelines:

1. Photo Essays must have high-resolution pictures along with text as a compressed or zip file as an attachment in e-mail. The paper-writers must ensure the copyright of all the photos used in their papers.
2. The author shall have to procure copyrights for image/photo used in the paper.
3. Word limit for Book Review(s) and Interview(s) is 1,200 and 4000 -4500 words respectively.

dialog

a bi-annual peer-reviewed journal

ISSN 0975-4881